TRIXY

By

MRS. GEORGIE SHELDON

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TRIXY

or

THE SHADOW OF A CRIME

By MRS. GEORGIE SHELDON

AUTHOR OF

"Virgie's Inheritance," "Earle Wayne's Nobility,"
"Stella Rosevelt," "His Heart's Queen,"
"Wedded by Fate," Etc.

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TRIXY

CHAPTER I

A LITTLE TEMPEST

"THERE! I positively *hate* everybody! there is *no* one to be trusted, and I'm sure I don't see what use there is in living at all in such a treacherous, miserable world!"

"Trixy! Trixy! child, what has happened to make my little friend so desperate and misanthropical?"

The first speaker was a young girl of seventeen, who had just bounced angrily from the spacious parlor of an imposing residence on ——th Avenue, into the hall, and who, while passionately giving vent to the ebullition of temper recorded above, and blindly rushing for the stairs, on the way to her room, was suddenly brought to a stand by finding herself inclosed in a pair of strong, manly arms, and the grave, handsome face of Eliot Harcourt, a young man of perhaps twenty-four or five years, looked kindly down upon her. His tones of surprise and gentle reproach brought the storm to a crisis, and a perfect tempest of sobs and tears instantly broke from the unhappy girl.

The young man stood perfectly quiet for a few minutes, and let her weep until the first fierce violence of her grief had spent itself.

Then he said:

"Now, Trixy, dear, what commotion of the domestic elements has served to raise such a tornado as this? What desperate battle have you been fighting, and what weapons

or stratagem could the enemy have employed to have so effectually put to rout such a valiant little heroine as you usually are?" and he glanced, with a half-amused smile, down upon the small, dark, curly head which kept bobbing up and down upon his broad chest, with every sob.

"Don't laugh at me, please, Eliot," came in plaintive, smothered tones from the still sobbing Trixy. "I am just as miserable as I can be, and—and—if I have to live at this rate for another year, or—until somebody comes to marry me, there won't be anything respectable left of me."

Eliot Harcourt laughed outright at this.

"And who is this somebody who is coming to relieve you of your misery?" he asked.

"You are too bad, Eliot," she said petulantly; "but you know that Uncle Albert's will keeps me under Uncle William and Aunt Roxy until I am eighteen, or until I'm married."

"Then you think you would even be willing to be married for the sake of bridging over one year of your life? Trixy, my dear, I'm afraid you don't fully realize the responsibilities which are before you," her companion said, with mock gravity.

"But, Eliot, they do *torment* me so, and make me *hate* everybody."

"*Everybody,* Trixy? he asked gently, while his shapely hand patted the curly head softly.

"Well—almost. Of course, I never *could* hate *you—you* are different from any one else," and with sudden impulse the young girl caught his hand, brought it around to her lips, and left a soft kiss upon it.

Eliot Harcourt flushed at the act, and let his hand drop at his side, feeling a trifle uncomfortable.

"How am I different?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. Her sobs had nearly ceased now, and she lifted a pair of dark, glorious eyes to his face. "Somehow you always seem *true,* and I can trust you.

You never say hateful or sarcastic things to me, but *they* torment me to death."

"Who are 'they,' Trixy?"

"Fred, Uncle William and Aunt Roxy."

"And Laura—is she unkind to you!" the young man questioned, an expression of anxiety crossing his face.

"No; Laura never *says* or *does* anything unkind; but lately Aunt Roxy makes it appear as if she dislikes me, too; and, oh! Eliot, that is the worst of all, for I have always loved Laura so well!" and the storm threatened to burst again.

"This won't do, my little tempest. This is the third time within a week that I have found you in a perfect gale. But we won't stand here talking about it. Come up to my studio, tell me all your troubles, and we'll see if there is not some remedy for them."

He tried to draw her toward the stairs as he spoke.

The girl resisted slightly.

"Aunt Roxy said I was to keep away from your studio; she would not allow me to annoy you; that is—I annoy *everybody!* she said bitterly.

"Indeed!" returned Mr. Harcourt, with a haughty lifting of his aristocratic eyebrows. Then he added:

"Well, Aunt Roxy must excuse me if I insist upon being allowed to invite whom I choose to my studio. Come, Trixy, I have a picture I want to show you after we disperse these clouds upon your brow."

Whereupon he led her up the stairs, and opening a door at the top, drew her into a charming room.

He made her sit down in a low rocker, in the sunny bay-window, and then, throwing himself upon a hassock at her feet, said:

"Now, my little friend, unburden yourself, and tell me all your woes."

Miss Trixy glanced at him, a flush rising to her cheek.

She was beginning to feel somewhat ashamed of the passion she had exhibited so lately.

Then her eyes wandered from his face to a mirror which hung opposite her, and the flush deepened painfully.

"Was *that* the picture you wished me to see?" she asked, with a quiver of passion in her voice.

His eyes followed hers, and he frowned.

"On my honor, no, Trixy, and it's too bad," he said regretfully.

The reflection was not a very attractive one just at that moment.

Anger had left ungraceful lines upon her broad, low brow. Her eyes were red and swollen with weeping; there were traces of tears upon her cheeks, lines of pain about her mouth, and her hair was sadly disheveled.

"I don't wonder Aunt Roxy says that I am a 'perfect fright,'" she cried passionately, and making a gesture of aversion at her reflected image.

Then she burst into a nervous laugh, and went on:

"I know I'm not pretty and graceful like Laura. I tan and freckle in the wind; my hair won't keep in place, and my clothes won't stay on me straight; I'm all hunches and rumples, from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. I think I must have been *made askew* someway, and if that's the case there is 'no use in *trying* to go agin nature,' as old Betsy Trull said the other day, when she tried to make her little black-and-tan's tail curl up instead of down, and couldn't. If they wouldn't twit me of it, I could bear it better; but Aunt Roxy says I am a 'disgrace to the house,' that 'Laura is ashamed to be seen on the street with me,' and so forth, and so on to the end of the chapter. *You* are the only one who does not seem to mind it, Eliot. Oh, dear! I wish you would *adopt* me, and take me away from the sight and sound of it all," Trixy concluded, with a sigh, and another rueful glance into the mirror opposite.

"Adopt you, Trixy?" the young man laughed. "Mercy, child! what should I do with you, when as yet I am hardly able to take care of myself?"

"Oh, we'd get along somehow for a year, and then I should have my fortune, you know. I wouldn't hinder you in your painting and sculpturing, and I could keep house for you—it would be just delightful!"

"What do *you* know about housekeeping?" Eliot asked amusedly.

"I know how to make a tipsy-pudding. I saw cook make one the other day, and I have made my bed ever so many times, when Molly, the chambermaid, was in a hurry. It's apt to look humpy in spots, just as I do, I suppose, and the pillows won't always stand up straight; but then I think I could improve if I tried."

"But, Trixy, I don't think I should like living on 'tipsy-pudding' all the time, and I'm *sure* I don't like 'humps' in my bed," Eliot returned, with twinkling eyes.

He knew she could not be long sorrowful when her natural drollery began to crop out like this.

Trixy sighed comically.

"I'm afraid that you wouldn't enjoy it, but it would be such a mercy if you could help me to plan some way to relieve me of this thorn in the flesh—yes, I believe Aunt Roxy is just that to me! Now, if you will credit it, I got up this morning firmly resolved that I'd do justice to myself, and compel it from the others for once. By the way, Eliot, I may as well say that I've made that resolution hundreds of times before, and have just as surely come to grief every time," she parenthesised with comical pathos. "I combed and brushed my hair—'every individual one'—to a nicety," she continued, "and upon my word, there wasn't a kink in it when I got through, which being 'agin nature' again, it didn't stay kinkless, and I must confess that it felt a little loose behind where I put the pins in. Then I put on a pretty new wrapper which the dress-maker sent home yesterday, pinned my collar just on a line with my nose and chin, put a rose in my belt—Laura always does that, you know—and just the sweetest pair of slippers on my feet. I gave seven dollars for them, and got an-

other scolding for that for my extravagance from Aunt Roxy. Well, Eliot," she said, with a gleam of fun springing to her eyes, "I declare to you in confidence, that I *did* consider myself a very respectable-looking girl when I had finished my toilet, in spite of the 'outs' that there are about me, as Fred says. But," and here she made a ludicrous grimace, "just as I was ready to go down to breakfast in my immaculate condition, I espied Frisky, my pet kitten, on the very top of the high board fence in the back yard, all bristled up and spitting like a small steam-engine at Mrs. Moreland's dog. I knew he'd munch every one of her nine lives out of her in less than no time, if he got to her, so I heedlessly rushed to the rescue. The jar of running down stairs made the pins fall out of my hair, and down it came all in a snarl. I was *afraid* that loose feeling meant something, but I didn't know how to help it. Then just as I was going out of the back door, I stepped square into a dish of soup that the cook had set out there for Frisky, and one of my new slippers was in a sad state of *soup-er-fluence.*"

"What an irrepressible Trixy!" laughed Eliot.

"I can assure you, though, that it was no laughing matter to me," retorted the child, for she seemed scarcely more than a child; and her sorrow was fast wearing away beneath the influence of his sympathy, while her expressive face began to dimple and gleam with fun and merriment.

She had had her cry and eased her heart, and now began, as she always did, to take a ludicrous view of her troubles.

"Well, to cap the climax, when I went to reach up after that bristling cat, I tore a great rent in my dress, and she, thinking, I suppose, that she was being attacked from the rear by some ambushed enemy, turned and gave me this sweeping, meandering scratch for my trouble."

Miss Trixy turned her head one side, and putting back her tumbled hair, revealed a long, unsightly mark upon one side of her neck.

"At this crisis the breakfast-bell rang. I let Frisky

go in disgust, pinned the hole in my dress together, so that Aunt Roxy would not see it, wiped off my shoe as well as I could with my handkerchief, and went to face the music. I forgot my hair, and didn't know that my collar, which I had not pinned to my dress, had slipped around under my left ear; but you should have seen the tableau when I marched into the dining-room!"

"But why didn't you go to your room and fix yourself up a trifle?" Eliot asked, with twitching lips.

"Because I *wouldn't,*" she answered, with a toss of her head. "It would have been of no earthly use, for something would have been sure to happen before I could possibly reach the dining-room, and it always makes Uncle William angry when any of us are late. Aunt Roxy's keen eyes spied that hole the first thing, then flashed up at my head, traveled down and observed that scratch, my dislocated collar, smiled grimly at the rose in my belt—which really was rather absurd under the circumstances—and finally came to a halt upon my greasy slippers.

" '*What* a fright!' she exclaimed, with a groan.

"Fred grinned from ear to ear, and observed that my maid must have had a touch of the horrors while performing my toilet that morning. Uncle William smiled sarcastically, and then, as if by common consent, every eye was turned on Laura, who stood there as sweet and fresh and bright as a June morning, and looking kindly pitiful at me.

" 'Go to your room,' commanded Mrs. Roxena, 'and stay there until I send for you!'

"I was bouncing mad, as the children say at school, and turned with a whisk that was like a miniature hurricane, but my chapter of accidents wasn't ended even yet. My sleeve caught on the handle of the coffee-pot and upset it; its contents flew over me like a small deluge, and I had the pleasing reflection, added to my other discomforts, that my respected uncle, who dotes on coffee, wouldn't have a drop to wet his whistle with that morning——"

"Trixy!"

"Yes, I know it. Aunt Roxy would scream and lift her white hands appealingly if she should hear me. You see there isn't a graceful line or curve about me anywhere. I'm all angles, corners and ridges, both physically and morally, can't move without upsetting something, can't speak without lapsing into slang, can't do anything pleasant or agreeable. I'm afraid the plan of my organization must have been meddled with by some mischievous and vindictive fairy, and so I suppose I shall go on being a fright and a torment all my life.

"Well, Eliot, I was very glad to obey Aunt Roxy for once, and went directly to my room, the starch, for once, all taken out of me as well as out of my dress. Feeling a little natural curiosity regarding myself, I went to the mirror to take a look. I won't weary you with details," she said, folding her hands demurely and dropping her mischievous eyes, "but I think it is safe to tell you that I *didn't* look very charming."

"Poor child! What a hard time you have had of it," the young man said, while the room rang with his laughter.

"Don't *you* begin to *pity* me!" flashed Trixy, with an angry glance. "I can bear anything better than that. Aunt Roxy says I am to be pitied, and *Laura* pities me, and *tries* to have patience with me. *Laura* is very much tried with my wayward doings and untidy habits, and so forth and so on. *Laura* is the pink of perfection and propriety. *She* never does anything *outré; she* never makes a false move nor says anything improper. Do you suppose, Eliot," she concluded pathetically, while the tears stood in her eyes, though she tried to smile, "that I shall have to go through the world and be such an odd stick all my life?"

"No, Trixy, you overrate your misfortunes; you will overcome all these things, by and by—you are scarcely more than a child now——"

"I am seventeen years old, or shall be in a day or two," she interrupted, bridling a trifle.

"I know, but pardon me, you do not appear nearly so old, and a year more will make a great change in you perhaps. But, my little friend, surely if you can make so light of what you have just told me, that cannot be *all* that made you so unhappy when I found you a little while ago," Eliot said, fixing his earnest eyes on her face.

"No," she said, flushing and looking down, while she twisted her hands nervously.

"Tell me all, Trixy—that is, if you can trust me?"

"Of course, I can trust you; but it seems too silly to tell any one, and yet it makes me so angry."

"Well?"

"Aunt Roxy sent for me about an hour ago and gave me a frightful lecture, as I knew she would, and she said if I did not mend my ways she would not have me in the house—she would send me to a convent. I've a perfect horror of being shut up in any such way as that, but she declares that I've got to learn to behave myself before I marry Fred."

"Marry Fred?" Eliot Harcourt ejaculated, and then gave vent to his surprise in a long-drawn whistle.

"That's what makes me boil over," Trixy answered, with scarlet cheeks. "She declares that just as soon as I'm eighteen I shall marry him, and —*I won't.*"

"Why, Trixy, you were wishing only a little while ago that some one *would* come and marry you to rid you of your troubles," Eliot said smilingly.

"Yes, but I do not wish any one to marry me who would get me *deeper* into trouble, and I think I'd rather call Mrs. Roxena aunt than mother," the young girl answered, with a queer mixture of trouble and humor.

"You are not very fond of your aunt, then? And so she's going to marry you to Fred, eh?"

"*No,* I tell you I *won't* marry Fred!" Trixy retorted spiritedly.

"If she finds so much fault with you, and considers

you such a 'fright,' I should hardly think she would want you for a daughter," Eliot said reflectively.

"She doesn't want me for a daughter—she wants my money," Trixy said scornfully.

"Are you sure, Trixy?" the young man questioned gravely.

"Of course I am, or I shouldn't say so; she is always scolding because Uncle Albert left all his property to Laura and me, and neither William nor Fred had a cent, and she insists that I am pledged to Fred."

"How does that happen?" asked her companion, soberly; "did you ever give him any promise of that kind?"

"No, indeed; but a long time ago when we were children, the Moreland girls used to come over here to play, and Fred was father while I was mother. One day we had been having great fun, and Fred said to me, 'You *will* truly marry me some time, won't you, Trixy?' 'Certainly I will,' I answered, and Aunt Roxy happened to come into the room at that moment, heard it, and told us we were betrothed."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Eliot Harcourt impatiently.

"Of course it is all nonsense, and I've no business to bother you with anything so silly, only you are so good to me, and it's such a comfort to let off steam once in a while—there! I've shocked you again," she added, breaking off short as she saw the change in his face.

"Never mind; just tell me what Aunt Roxy said to you to-day," he returned.

"Oh, I couldn't begin to tell you, and you'd be frightened if I should repeat to you all. She shook me up, to begin with——"

"What!" he cried, with flashing eyes, "a young lady like you!"

"Oh, dear! I didn't mean to say that," said Trixy regretfully; "and I suppose I did aggravate her, for when she asked me how I supposed she was going to manage to put up with me all the days of her life, I told her she

needn't be troubled about it, for nothing on earth would ever tempt me into such bondage as she was planning for me. She grabbed me by the arm and shook me, said that Laura and I were both marplots, and talked in such a way that, for the first time in my life, I was really afraid of her."

"Did she speak of Laura in that way?" asked Eliot soberly.

"Yes; but I never meant anyone should know of it, and that was what made me half-afraid of her, for she always pretends to be so fond of Laura. Eliot, I think she's very, very angry about Uncle Albert's fortune," Trixy concluded confidentially.

"Well, try and forget it if you can. I am glad you told me this; but we will keep our own counsel upon the matter. And now, little one, I want to ask you if it would comfort you if you could be made to feel that you are not the 'fright' that you have been called for so long?"

"Oh, Eliot, I should be *happy* if I thought I had even *one* really pretty feature. If I was *sure* anyone thought me pretty I do not believe I should be so awkward; it would give me—well—a sort of *confidence* in myself. Now Laura is lovely, and see how stately and charming all her ways are."

"Yes, Laura is certainly very beautiful," the young man returned musingly, "but hers is a very different style of beauty from yours."

"From mine! Eliot, *don't* mock me," Trixy cried sharply.

"I am not mocking you, Trixy," he answered gently; "you are somewhat tanned and freckled, as you say, but a little care would remedy that, and your skin is very smooth and fine. You have very delicate, regular features, and—well—I won't go on," he said, smiling at her earnest face; "but I have a favor to ask of you, Trixy."

"I am glad if there is anything that I can do for you, Eliot," she said with tremulous lips.

If *he* did not think her quite a fright she could be happy.

"It will not be very agreeable," he said.

"Never mind, and so much the better; it will prove my willingness; what is it?"

"Then run to your room, tie your hair smoothly back from your face, put on some old dress that you would not fear to soil, and then come back to me."

"Are you going to let me help you paint?" she asked eagerly.

"No; I'll tell you what when you return."

"All right. I'll be back in a trice; by-by; you are a dear old fellow; but I wouldn't want Aunt Roxy to know what a comfort you are to me."

"Why not?" Eliot asked, with a smile.

"Because she makes it a point of duty never to let me have or do anything that I like, and she would turn you out in the cold world if she knew how much I think of you. But just wait until Beatrice Waldron, the heiress, reaches her majority and has a house of her own, *you* shall have the snuggest corner in it."

"There, don't make any rash promises, you impulsive child, but run away now, and come back to me just as soon as you can."

He watched her laughing face and sparkling eyes as she stood for a moment in the door-way, and then kissing the tips of her fingers to him, she sped from the room to do his bidding.

"A fright, indeed!" was the young artist's indignant comment; "if she doesn't develop into a downright beauty in less than a year, I am very much mistaken. So Mrs. Waldron means to have the handling of some of the old bachelor's money? Um! well, my innocent, pretty little Trixy shall not be the victim if I can help it."

CHAPTER II

HELPING TO MAKE A FORTUNE

WHILE Trixy, cheered and comforted by the sympathy of Eliot Harcourt, has gone to do his bidding, we will introduce the inmates of the Waldron mansion a little more fully to our readers.

Mr. William Waldron was—not a hundred years ago—a prosperous merchant of New York; at least his manner of living and the business that he was doing seemed to indicate a certain degree of prosperity, and his ambitious wife knew well how to spend to the best advantage the liberal income which her husband allowed her. They had two sons—William Waldron, Jr., who, just at the time of the opening of our story, was away at college, and Frederick, some two years younger, and who was pursuing a private course of study in the city where his parents resided, preparatory to entering college in another year.

The other members of the family comprised Miss Laura Preston, aged nineteen, and Beatrice Waldron, seventeen. Both were nieces of Mr. William Waldron, senior—one the daughter of a sister, the other of a brother.

Laura and Beatrice, or Trixy, as she was more commonly called, were both heiresses, and their wealth fell to them in this way:

Mr. Waldron had an elder brother, a bachelor, who had accumulated a large fortune in some foreign country, and when his whitening locks and waning strength began to warn him that his hold upon earth and earthly things was growing weaker with every day, he turned his face homeward to consider what was best for him to do with the gold for which he had toiled all his days, and now must leave for some one else to spend.

He found that all his kindred, save his one brother, had "gone the way of all the earth." Laura's mother

had been his only, and a very dearly-loved sister, and Beatrice's father was a twin brother, and these two young girls, their only offspring, were left orphans and almost homeless and friendless in the world. Mrs. Waldron had not as yet felt it her duty to receive them into her family to care for and educate.

Finding his brother William apparently so prosperous, Mr. Albert Waldron made it his first work to hunt up these children and to provide a home for them.

They were bright and charming girls, and well repaid him for his love and kindness during the little time he remained with them, and they became as dear to him as if they had been his very own.

But death drew nigh after a few short months, and he knew they would soon be left without a protector again. He did not particularly admire his brother's cold, calculating wife, but William's home was the only place which he knew of that would be at all suitable for his charges, so he made his will, dividing his property equally between the two cousins, with the proviso that if either died without heirs, her share should fall to the other, and if both should die without heirs, their fortune should be divided between his brother's boys. Mr. William Waldron was constituted their guardian, and they were to remain under his care and control until they should reach their majority —eighteen years—or marry. This important piece of business transacted, the world-weary man yielded up his unsatisfactory life, and was "gathered to his fathers."

This was seven years before the opening of our story, and during all this time the cousins had been under Mrs. Roxena Waldron's care.

Miss Laura Preston and Beatrice Waldron were entirely different characters, in her estimation, after they became heirs to the large fortune of Mr. Albert Waldron, from what they had been when they were "poverty-stricken orphans," and it was noticeable with what pride she was accustomed to speak of "my nieces, Laura and Trixy."

But she never ceased to chafe over the fact that *they* received all, while *her* children had comparatively nothing from their rich uncle; and from the first she began to nurse a scheme which should result in securing these fortunes to her own family—namely, the marrying of the young heiresses to her sons. She resolved that this money should not slip through her fingers, if any stratagem or force upon her part could accomplish this desired end.

There is no knowing what might have been the result if she had adopted a different course—if she had loved them tenderly, and made them love her in return.

But she was cold and passionless by nature. She did not try to win their hearts, or make herself necessary to their happiness. She never expressed any affection for them—never addressed them fondly, or called them by any pet names. Her lips never kissed them, her arms never enfolded them, and the poor hungry waifs turned to each other, and their hearts became cemented in bonds of strongest affection.

For several years Mrs. Waldron paid no heed to this fact, but she suddenly awoke one day to a feeling of jealousy over it, and she immediately set herself to work to sow dissension between them; they must not be allowed to give to each other the affection which she intended should belong to her sons. If they were too happy and contented in each other's society, they would not properly appreciate the companionship of William and Fred.

Laura was a blonde of the purest type. Great, blue, starry eyes looked forth from beneath a full, intelligent brow. Her skin was faultlessly fair and smooth, her nose small, and her mouth very sweet and expressive. Her hair —a perfect wealth of it, and like burnished gold—as a child, hung in close, heavy curls all over her shoulders, as a maiden, and dressed accordingly, it was full of rich, sunshiny waves. Her form was of medium height and rather slight, but the poise of her head, and her quiet, rather proud bearing, gave one the impression that she

was taller than she really was. In disposition she was naturally sweet and gentle, quiet and somewhat reserved, but possessing underneath all an unyielding will when once she had fully made up her mind to any course of action.

Mrs. Waldron discovered at a very early day that coercion was not a measure to be adopted in the government of her eldest niece. Those sweet blue eyes would begin to light up with a strangely luminous glow, and those expressive lips close firmly over her white teeth if she tried to force her to anything, and though her voice was never raised above a lady-like tone, her quiet "I do not wish to," was equivalent to the strongest "I will not." She was very orderly about everything, and extremely dainty regarding her personal appearance, and it was a pleasure to look at her. Thus Mrs. Waldron grew to stand a trifle in awe of the quiet, self-contained girl, and treated her with consideration and deference, while she always held her up as a model, and spoke of her as a favorite.

Poor Trixy was just the reverse in everything.

She had a very dark, though clear skin, hair black as jet, great, glorious, black eyes, and delicate, clear-cut features. She was full of fun, sparkle, and wit as a kitten is of play. She was impulsive, heedless, disorderly, and rebellious when her antagonism was aroused; but loving, gentle, and yielding toward those whom she loved. She never allowed an opportunity for a joke to pass, no matter who was the victim; was always in mischief, and the greater the risk the better she enjoyed it. She saw the ludicrous side of everything, and was both the life and torment of the whole house.

Being younger than Laura, Mrs. Waldron had always exercised more authority over her, and although the child never experienced a feeling of fear for her, yet she would often apparently give up the contest with her, in order to escape from her disagreeable presence, and in this way the woman came to believe she was gaining the ascendency over her, and grew more arbitrary as Trixy grew older.

Mrs. Waldron had never yet presumed to hint anything of her plans for the future to Laura, but after that unlucky conversation to which Trixy referred, in unbosoming herself to Eliot Harcourt, she neglected no opportunity to impress it upon her, that *she* was betrothed to Frederick Waldron.

Eliot himself, although not exactly a member of this family, was, nevertheless, a connection, being a son of a step-sister of Mrs. Waldron.

He was an artist, possessing no mean talents, and had come to the city to pursue his profession. He was also alone in the world, and having his own way to make, Mrs. Waldron had, actuated by a sudden and unusual impulse, offered him a room in her large house for a studio.

He had gratefully accepted it, and for three years had mingled daily with the family, although he boarded at a hotel near by.

For his aunt it cannot be said that he had very much respect, after studying her character for thirty-six months; but Mr. Waldron he knew to be a man of sterling worth. His cousins were not particularly congenial to him, and he saw but little of them. His opinion of Laura he did not confess to any one—hardly to himself, but of Trixy he made a pet and plaything, enjoying her wit and vivacity, which were like sparkling wine to him, and constituting himself her friend and comforter upon all occasions. This state of things did not please Mrs. Waldron at all, and of late she had forbidden Trixy to go to his studio; but the wilful maiden needed very little coaxing to induce her to forget all such commands, as our opening chapter has already shown.

"Here you have me—will I do?" said a clear, sweet voice behind him, a half-hour after Eliot had sent Trixy away.

He turned to look, and saw a picture.

She had bathed her face and brushed her hair back from it, tying it behind in a loose cluster of waving curls, and

had put on a simple, clean white wrapper. Her dusky eyes shone with pleasure and expectation; her cheeks glowed, and her attitude was replete with unstudied grace, as she stood waiting by the half-open door for his approval.

It was a bewitching little face that laughed and sparkled at him—not regularly, purely beautiful like Laura Preston's, but bright and piquant, full of vivacity; its ever-varying expression being its chief charm.

"Yes, indeed, you will do," Eliot answered, with an appreciative glance, and his artist soul kindling as he looked—'that is," he added, "if you are willing to submit to the ordeal I am going to propose."

"Fear not to ask my liege, even if it be to the half of my kingdom," Trixy returned, laughing.

"You are generous, but I have only one little disagreeable favor to ask of you," he said.

"It cannot be disagreeable if *you* request it," she said eagerly.

"Wait until you know what it is before you pass judgment; and—Trixy, it is to be merely an experiment, and I would like it to remain a secret between you and me."

"A secret!" she exclaimed, with dancing eyes, "*mon ami,* now I am happy—just between you and me.

"No eye to watch, and no tongue to wound us,
All earth forgot, and all heaven around us."

she trilled gayly.

Eliot laughed.

"What a little irrepressible you are, Trixy. Come here, and be quiet for just one minute, while I tell you what I want. If you *won't* behave I'll set you in a corner till you promise to be good."

She came and leaned on one arm of his chair and looked up into his face with the confidence of a child, but full of mischief. Her pose was one of inimitable grace, and she seemed like some bright, dainty bird, as she tossed her small head and quoted saucily:

"There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats;
For I am arm'd so strong in honesty
That they pass by me as the idle wind."

"Indeed, Trixy, you are armed with a dangerous weapon, if you did but know it," he said, regarding her with admiring eyes and wondering that any one could call her a "fright." "But," he added, "we'll to business, do you know what it is to have the cast of one's features taken?"

Her bright face fell for an instant; then she shrugged her pretty shoulders and made a comical grimace at him.

"Yes," she said; "it is to have one's eyes, nose and mouth plugged up with plaster of Paris. Ah! Eliot, now are all my fond hopes blasted; I had an idea that I was to *do* something for you. I didn't *dream* that you'd presume to *throw dust* in my eyes in any such way as this."

Eliot laughed at the look of mock distress which she assumed as much as at her joke.

"What a pat little tongue you have between your teeth, Trixy!" he said, "but I would like to take a cast of your features. Still, if the idea is very disagreeable to you, we will say no more about it. I told you you would not like it."

"But, Eliot, what can you want of *my* face?" she asked thoughtfully. "If it were Laura's now, I should not think strangely of it."

"I cannot tell you just why I prefer yours for this purpose, but I do. I am going to make a bust—in fact, as I said before, try an experiment. I do not want a purely classical face, nor a regularly beautiful one. It is a whim of mine, Trixy, to see how well and truthfully I can catch expression. But I see it isn't a pleasant thought to you, so we will drop it. What do you think of this picture?" and he turned to a painting that he had been at work upon when she entered.

She did not reply, but stood quietly by his side watching him for a few moments, then she said:

"You shall take a cast of my face, Eliot."

"I am afraid you are sacrificing your own feelings to please me," he returned, regarding her gravely:

"No; I would really like to know just how I look; and yes, Eliot," her face dimpling all over with fun, "to give you the pleasure, just for once, of effectually stopping my saucy mouth."

A week later Eliot Harcourt opened his studio door as Trixy came tripping up the stairs singing snatches of a gay opera and beckoned her to come in.

With an eager look leaping into her eyes, a smile on her scarlet lips, which were parted just enough to show the edges of her white teeth beneath, she entered.

"Is it done?" she asked breathlessly.

"Not quite; I have still to touch it up a little; but you can gain some idea of how Trixy Waldron looks from it," he said smilingly, and then led her behind a screen which stood in one corner of the room.

There upon the table stood a bust of a young girl, so life-like and beautiful that Trixy uttered an involuntary cry of delight.

The cast of features was perfect; the broad, low forehead, the delicately penciled brow, the wide, mischievous, arching eyelids, the symmetrical nose, the saucy lips, and the rounded chin were all true to life.

But the "experiment" which Eliot Harcourt had tried made the pulseless clay seem like veritable flesh and blood.

He had painted it as he would have painted a picture!

Trixy's clear olive complexion was faithfully reproduced —all excepting the little freckles which had so troubled her—as were also her large black eyes, her midnight lashes, her rosy cheeks and scarlet lips. Her small ear, with the health-flush on it, seemed like some delicate sea-shell, and there was even the little mole just under one side of her chin, which all her life had been such a course of annoyance to her.

But, to crown the whole wonderful work, Eliot had

somewhere procured a wig of kinky, curly hair, which he had arranged with a careless grace that was very like Trixy's own, even to the little fuzzy, fluffy crimps falling over the shapely forehead almost down to the laughing, saucy eyes.

The young girl stood looking at herself, utterly speechless after that one cry of wondering delight, while a deep flush, mounting slowly in her cheeks and spreading itself over her whole face, showed how deeply she was moved.

"Well, Trixy, what do you think of my 'experiment?' " Eliot asked, after he had watched her in silence for several moments.

"I'm afraid you have made it pretty, just to comfort me," she said naively; then added, with a little thrill in her voice: "If I thought that *I* really looked like *that,* I don't think that all the Aunt Roxys in the world could ever again make me unhappy by calling me a 'fright.' "

"You *are not* a fright, little one, and don't ever let the word trouble you again. To me your sparkling little face is one of the brightest things in the world. I do not mean to flatter you, Trixy, and I think you *might* improve upon your general appearance by protecting your face when you are out in the wind and sun, and by a little more attention to the minor details of your dress. You'll bear this bit of a lecture from me, *caro mio,* because you know I am not finding fault, only suggesting; and now I will tell you that I have long wanted to try this thing. I wanted to see if it was possible to make a bust of a person, and faithfully catch the expression, as well as copy the features; and I may say that I am quite satisfied with my work, or shall be when I have finished it. Perhaps, Trixy," he concluded, smiling, "you have helped to make my fortune—who knows."

Trixy lifted her great eyes to his handsome face, and he saw there were tears in them.

With a little laugh that was half a sob, she seized one of his hands, lifted it to her quivering lips, then, with

one more glance at her other self, she turned and darted from the room. Her heart was too full to admit of her staying for another moment.

"What a dear little impulsive thing she is," Eliot Harcourt murmured, as he covered his "experiment" with a cloth, and then turned to another piece of work.

CHAPTER III

"IS LIFE ALL A CHEAT?"

A FEW moments after Trixy's flight from Eliot Harcourt's studio, there came a gentle rap at his door. He was not surprised at the sound.

"Come in," he said, without changing his position or pausing in his work.

The door opened and a young girl of about nineteen entered.

She was very, very beautiful, with her slender, graceful figure, the stately poise of her head, her clear, liquid eyes, and a complexion which was like the first flush of morning upon snow.

She paused, however, on the threshold, as she saw him apparently so busy.

"Excuse me, Mr. Harcourt," she said, in pure, quiet tones. "I fear I am interrupting you."

"Not at all. Come in," he answered heartily.

"Can you spare me just a moment?"

"With pleasure, Miss Laura. What can I do for you?" he asked, looking up now with a smile.

Laura Preston's color wavered and deepened a trifle, as she met his glance, and there was the least perceptible quiver about her sensitive mouth as she replied:

"I wish a little advice, please, about the shading in this picture. I think I am inclined to get it too heavy, and it

spoils the effect, and I thought perhaps you would tell me just how to remedy it."

She came forward as she spoke and placed a small landscape drawing in his hands.

He looked at it gravely and critically while she stood by watching him.

Why did this man appear so different in the presence of this fair girl from what he did when the merry, laughing Trixy was with him?

There was an evident constraint in his manner, and a gravity amounting almost to sternness upon his face.

The expression of his eyes was entirely changed, with a sort of troubled, wistful look, even the tones of his voice were different. They sounded cold and repressed, and wholly unlike the free, clear ring in his gay bantering with Trixy.

"This is what you should do to give the picture a lighter look," he said, holding out his hand for her pencil.

She gave it to him, and with a few skillful touches here and there, he gave it a very different appearance, and then handed it back to her, and took up his brush again.

She thanked him, suppressing a little sigh, while she glanced at him half-wistfully, half-anxiously.

"You seem to be very busy of late, Mr. Harcourt," she said, lingering by his side, and looking at his picture.

He winced as she spoke his name. He had always been "Eliot" to her as well as to Trixy until within the last few months.

"Yes, I have *need* to be busy, you know," he answered, while his brow contracted slightly.

"I fear you do not take *needful* rest, you are not looking as well as usual," she said, while her troubled eyes searched his averted face.

A slight flush tinged the young man's cheek at these words, and the hand that was mixing paint upon his palette trembled a trifle.

But he replied quietly:

"I am quite well, thank you; but," he added with some animation, as if he wished to change the subject, "what is the matter with Trixy? she has not seemed like herself lately."

"Do you think so? I had not noticed that she appeared ill," Laura Preston returned absently, while her eyes followed that manly hand, as it touched with gold and crimson the graceful leaves of a maple in his picture.

"No, not ill, but unhappy at times," he said.

"How beautiful it is," Laura said, as if she had not heard him.

"What?"

"Your picture; your coloring is always perfect."

Eliot smiled, and wondered within himself what she would say to the bust of Trixy. He was half-tempted to show it to her, but concluded not to upon second thought.

"Thank you," he returned. "I am getting this ready for the exhibition."

"If that is the case I predict that it will win golden opinions," she said, smiling.

"If it will bring me the 'gold,' I will do without the rest," he said, with a tinge of bitterness in his tone.

"Are you so avaricious?" Laura asked jestingly. "I thought all artists cared more for fame than gain."

"I should not reject the former, but just now I happen to be more in want of the filthy lucre than of anything else in the world. No, I should not say just that," he added, checking himself, and with a rising flush, "but money is an exceedingly convenient article to possess."

"Yes, if one makes good use of it," the fair girl returned gently.

"Let me but gain a fortune, and I will put it to the best use in the world," Eliot Harcourt said, with a short, nervous laugh.

"And what would that be?" gravely inquired his companion, her clear eyes studying his face.

"Winning happiness for myself," he replied, in the same

light tone as before, yet with firmly compressed lips, and a strange gleam in his eye.

"I do not think the mere possession of a fortune would satisfy any one, least of all *you,*" she replied hesitatingly, and he thought how little she realized the truth of what she said, at least so far as he was concerned.

"Nor the selfish use of it," she added, after a moment. "It is only the *giving* of happiness that brings happiness."

"You are epigrammatic, Miss Preston. May I inquire, however, just what you mean by that?" Eliot said dryly.

The flush on her cheek deepened to a vivid scarlet, but she answered with quiet self-possession, though in a reverent tone:

" 'Go sell what thou hast and give to the poor.' "

Eliot Harcourt arched his fine brows, while a slightly sarcastic smile curved his lips.

"Do you mean that all one's wealth should literally be given away to the beggars in the streets?" he asked.

"No; but if God has given us abundance, we should use it, not to gratify our own selfish desires alone, but wisely, and in a way to accomplish the highest and best possible good."

"Is that what you do with your money, Miss Preston?"

He did not know what possessed him to ask such a question, and he could have twisted his tongue out for having been so uncivil the moment the words were uttered.

The blood rushed to her very brow and her eyes flashed.

"Excuse me," she said coldly. "I was not speaking of myself at all, but merely in a general way."

"Excuse *me,* Laura, for my rudeness. I don't know what imp possessed me to speak so," he said regretfully.

"You are forgiven," she returned, with a smile, "and I trust you will pardon me for inflicting you with such a lecture upon charity."

"It was no infliction, I assure you, and now to change the subject and return to Trixy, what is the trouble between you?"

"Trouble?" Laura repeated, in surprise. "There is no trouble, only—Trixy does not seem to like me quite as well of late as she used to."

"What makes you think that?"

"She used to run to me with all her hopes and troubles, and now she seems to avoid me—she tells me nothing, and if I attempt to offer sympathy or advice she resents it," and the young girl sighed heavily as she spoke.

"Can you assign no reason for this change?" Eliot asked.

"None—unless——" she hesitated, flushing again. "Aunt Roxy *says* a little too much, and it arouses Trixy's antagonism. Perhaps, Eliot," she added, the color deepening while she met his eyes wistfully, "you do not know that I, too, am a trifle proud and sensitive, and if any one draws away from me it hurts and repels me, and I grow cold and distant also."

"Is that why you have been so cold to me of late, Laura? Have I repelled you in any way?" Eliot asked, bending closer over his work.

"I cold toward you! it is you who have been like *ice* to me," she returned hastily, and with something like passion in her tones.

He turned quickly and looked at her, an expression in his eyes that made her tremble and droop her white lids.

He opened his lips impulsively as if to speak hot, passionate words, then he closed them again resolutely, forcing back into his heart with an iron will, all the love that his tongue was burning to utter, and said, almost coldly:

"Forgive me, I have not meant to appear so."

The vivid color instantly receded from Laura Preston's face, leaving her pale as marble at these words.

She drew her slender form erect, her proud head assumed a prouder poise, though the white hand which hung among the folds of her dress at her side, closed convulsively, as if from sudden pain.

For a moment there was an awkward silence, then she asked in her usual quiet tone:

"Do you know that William has returned for a short holiday?"

"No. When did he arrive?" came with an effort from between the artist's tightly shut lips.

"This morning; and I must not forget that Aunt Roxy has arranged for a drive at three. It is nearly that now, and I must go. Thanks for the help you have given me upon my picture," and with a stately bend of her shining head, Laura Preston turned and glided from the room.

Her own was just across the hall, and it took her but an instant to reach its shelter, where once safely locked within, her proud self-possession all forsook her.

"What have I done to offend him?" she cried, with a sob; "he is so cold, so distant, and he used to be so—so kind. First, Trixy forsakes me, and now *he* has turned against me; there is no sympathy between Aunt Roxy and me. Uncle William is all absorbed in business, and Fred is a mere boy. William has returned and is always attentive to me, but somehow I do not like him very well. I feel like a stranger in my own home. Oh! Eliot, if you only knew——" she stopped short, her face flaming. "What am I saying?" she cried passionately. "Only a little while ago I heard him laughing and jesting with Trixy; can it be I am *ashamed* of myself—where is your boasted pride, Laura Preston?"

For a moment she buried her face in her hands; then, throwing back her head proudly, said:

"No one shall *ever* dream how weak and foolish I am."

She walked with a firm, haughty step to her dressing-case, wrapped the picture she still held in her hands carefully in some soft white paper, locked it away in a drawer, and then turned to prepare herself for her drive.

As soon as the door of Eliot Harcourt's studio closed after the retreating form of the proud girl, the young artist dashed his brush to the floor and bowed his face upon his hands with a groan.

"Oh! the curse of poverty!" he cried, after a moment,

and then, springing to his feet, he began to pace the room with hasty, impatient strides.

"Here I sit, day after day," he went on, with frowning brow and lips whitening with pain, "and drudge my life away for a pittance, when I know that if I were anything but the beggar that I am I might win her in spite of her coldness and pride. But," he added, with clenched hands, "*no* one shall ever have a right to say that I was a fortune-hunter. I will stand upon equal ground with the bride I win or *I will never marry.* Here I am at twenty-four without a thousand dollars to my name, and with only my talent and my two hands to win fame and fortune. I'll *do* it, though—I swear I'll do it yet; but while I am toiling and slaving, and spending the best years of my life, some other man may win her, and then the dream of my life will perish. No matter," he added, with a bitter laugh, "I'll win the gold all the same, and then I can give it to the beggars. I begin to think with Dryden that 'life is all a cheat.'

> " 'Yet fooled with hope, men favor the deceit;
> Trust on, and think to-morrow will repay;
> To-morrow's falser than the former day;
> Lies *worse;* and while it *says* we shall be blest
> With some new joys, cuts off what we possest.'

"I wonder if my life is to be one mad race after gold, and whether it will end in failure and disappointment? I shall not fail to make money in the end, if I have my health and bend all my energies to it; but will it bring me the joy I crave? or is it, as Laura said, that 'only the giving of happiness brings happiness'? What is man made for, anyway?—what is he put into the world for, with all these temptations and snares, if they are only to result in vanity and vexation of spirit? It is a riddle—a puzzle that I cannot solve."

He fell into troubled and sullen musing, which lasted until he heard a carriage drive to the door, and saw William Waldron help first his mother, then Laura into the hand-

some vehicle, and then seating himself beside his cousin, drive them away.

Then picking up his discarded brush, Eliot fell to work again upon his picture with rapid, resolute strokes; but there were lines of keen pain about his mouth, and his brow was moody and overcast.

CHAPTER IV

INTERRUPTED

William Waldron, Junior, was very like his mother in character—cold, calculating, ambitious to possess wealth and influence.

Like her, he continually chafed over the fact that his uncle's money had all been given to his orphan cousins; but, as there was no such thing as revoking the will, he was forced to make the best of a bad matter, and influenced by his mother, he had long ago settled in his own mind that some day he should make Laura Preston his wife.

It had been a mere matter of business with him at first—to get a handsome fortune with as little trouble as possible; but as Laura grew toward womanhood, and he saw how surpassingly lovely she was becoming, he began to take pride in her, and finally ended by loving her, as well as his selfish and passionless nature could love anybody. He was very unlike Eliot Harcourt in both appearance and character.

The latter was large of stature, with a grandly shaped head set proudly upon square, broad shoulders. He had aristocratic and somewhat haughty features, dark eyes which were both grave and searching, chestnut hair, and full beard of the same hue; while he possessed a self-reliant, independent spirit, and one that scorned to commit a mean or petty act under any circumstances.

William Waldron was light, with cold, grayish eyes, a

slender form, which, always clad in the height of style, gave him a dandified appearance. There was an expression of cunning and craft about his face which made a pure-minded person instinctively shrink from him; while his thin lips, with their drooping corners, told plainly enough of the avarice of his nature.

Although he was always attentive and polite to Laura, and exerted himself, when at home, to make himself agreeable to her, yet there was something about him, as she had said, that made her dislike him, and repelled her.

He was now at home for a two-weeks' holiday, and he had resolved that these two weeks should settle the important question of his life—namely, whether he was to marry the beautiful heiress or not.

He intimated as much to his mother upon the first day of his return, and she watched the progress of this precious scheme with no small amount of anxiety; for well she knew, by past experience, that when Laura had once clearly made up her mind upon any one point, there was no turning her. She never decided any question until she had considered it thoroughly, and then, when it was once settled, it was settled for all time.

Trixy often yielded a point, "to save a fuss," as she expressed it; but let Laura's quiet "no" once be spoken, and all arguments, all threats, were worse than useless.

She was courteous, respectful, gentle, but the decision was unalterable.

"Laura is winning a great deal of admiration, my son; she is a favorite wherever she goes, and I truly hope you may succeed in gaining her consent to an engagement before you go back," Mrs. Waldron had said when William had hinted regarding his intentions.

"I am as anxious for a favorable answer as you can possibly be, mother, and I think you may safely trust me to do my best to win her," he replied.

"Yes; but I must caution you to be very careful how you approach her, as she is as obstinate as ever. No one

would believe, to look at her—she is apparently so gentle and winning—that she has such an indomitable will."

"Let me but get her to answer me 'yea,' and the knot once securely tied, I don't care that for her will!" retorted William, scornfully snapping his fingers.

"Laura, my dear," said Mrs. Roxena Waldron blandly, and opening that young lady's door one afternoon a few days later, "William wished me to ask you if you would enjoy attending the opera this evening?"

Now the opera was one of Laura's especial delights, as Mrs. Waldron very well knew, and just at present there were unusual attractions in the city.

"Are you going also, Aunt Roxy?" Laura cautiously asked, before committing herself. She had no desire for a *tete-a-tete* with her cousin, especially as he had been more devoted of late than was at all agreeable to her.

"I am sorry, dear, but my neuralgia is troubling me to-day, and I do not think it prudent to go out. But perhaps Trixy will like to go."

Mrs. Waldron saw that she was upon the point of refusing if she had to go alone with William, and she slyly mentioned Trixy in order to gain her assent.

She knew very well, however, that Trixy would *not* go, as she had made her very angry only a little while before by telling her that Laura was exceedingly annoyed at something that she had done that day.

"I should really like to go," Laura said thoughtfully. "Yes, you may tell William that I will, and I'll go at once and find Trixy and tell her about it."

This was all that Mrs. Waldron wanted. Laura had said, "Yes, I will go," and she knew she would not break her word, Trixy to the contrary notwithstanding.

Laura went immediately to seek Trixy, and found her in the music-room.

She had been practicing, but was now leaning wearily against the piano, looking both pale and unhappy. She was so absorbed in her own thoughts that she did not

hear her cousin approaching, or suspect her presence, until Laura laid her soft hands against her cheeks, and gently drawing back her head so that she could look into her face, asked kindly:

"Trixy, what is it? You are looking troubled about something."

Trixy flushed and jerked her head away from the tender touch.

"Nothing much," she answered, with averted eyes.

"I think there *is* a great deal the trouble," Laura returned resolutely, "and now I want you to tell me what it is that has caused this coldness toward me of late. You avoid me, you refuse all sympathy, and I can scarcely get a word with you from morning till night. I miss the pleasant hours that we used to spend together; I am lonely, and I want you, Trixy."

"But you have grown to dislike me, and I do not like to trouble or annoy you," Trixy said, with a voice full of tears.

"Indeed, I do not dislike you; I love you dearly, like a sister," Laura returned quickly and winding her arms around the drooping form.

"Do you really, Laura?" the young girl asked, a glad light leaping into her eyes. "Then what makes Aunt Roxy keep telling me——"

"Well, Trixy, dear, have you concluded to go?" asked the bland tones of Mrs. Waldron behind them.

"Go where?" Trixy asked, starting half-guiltily from Laura's embrace.

"Hasn't Laura told you that William wants to take you both to the opera?" she said, without wincing at the lie. "That is," she added pointedly, if *you* have anything fit to wear; I should be sorry to have you mortify either William or Laura by an untidy appearance."

The goad had been very skillfully applied and took effect accordingly.

"*No,* I do not wish to go," the girl cried passionately,

and darted from the room before Laura could interpose a word.

"That child is enough to discourage the stoutest heart," ejaculated Mrs. Roxena Waldron with a deep-drawn sigh.

The sigh, however, was one of relief that she had found the girls in season to prevent any confidences, and that Trixy was well disposed of and William would have the field clear for to-night, which was destined to decide the all-important question, as she hoped.

"I think you do not take the right way to manage Trixy, Aunt Roxy," Laura said gravely and feeling inwardly impatient that the interview had been so interrupted.

"Why, Laura," and Mrs. Roxena's eyebrows formed a perfect arch of astonishment, while her tone was suggestive of wounded affection.

"Trixy is high-spirited and sensitive, and should be dealt with tenderly instead of being made an object of ridicule," pursued Laura in the same tone as before.

"I'm sure I've *tried* to do my duty by you both," returned Mrs. Waldron with an offended air.

"I do not doubt it," Laura answered gently; "but I'm afraid you do not quite understand Trixy, and *please* do not ever speak of her annoying *me* again; I am more annoyed to have the dear girl made unhappy than I possibly can be by anything that she does. I fear that she has been estranged from me in this way."

And Miss Preston, feeling a trifle indignant at the way her cousin had been treated, left the room without waiting for a reply.

"Hoity-toity! we shall have to be pretty careful how we carry sail for the next few days, I fear," Mrs. Walron muttered, with a very red and angry face; but she had gained her point and was satisfied. Laura would go alone to the opera with William.

Laura tried to find Trixy, to urge her again to go with them, but she was not to be found anywhere. She had

taken refuge in Eliot Harcourt's studio, where she poured out her troubles into his sympathizing ear, and did not make her appearance again among the family during the afternoon or at tea-time.

Laura Preston was dazzingly beautiful that evening as she sat beside William Waldron in a conspicuous box at the opera.

Her dress was a pale-blue satin, garnished with a network of pearls, wax-like camelias in her golden hair and upon her bosom.

It was a very simple though elegant toilet, most becoming to her pure complexion, while the snowy flowers about her were not fairer than the lovely face, and the gleaming neck and arms, which seemed like marble through the misty lace that she wore over them.

Eliot Harcourt thought he had never looked upon any picture so beautiful as that she had made sitting there in a frame of crimson and gold, formed by the graceful loopings of the heavy curtains of the opera box. But it was a very bitter sigh that he heard as he noted the tender manner in which her escort bent over her whenever he spoke to her, and he did not hear half the bright, piquant sayings of the little lady by his own side.

Laura was not long in discovering his presence, and, as she saw his companion, she gave a start of surprise.

"Why, there is Trixy, after all!" she exclaimed. "See, William, how pretty she is looking—even Aunt Roxy could find no fault with her to-night."

"Yes, the little midget does look bewitchingly pretty to-night, and at this distance. But I fear mother would say, if she were here, that she would not bear a closer inspection," the young man returned with a light laugh.

"I wonder how she happened to come with Eliot? I went to ask her to come with us, but something prevented,

and I did not get another opportunity," Laura said with a troubled look on her face.

Mr. Waldron, Junior, smiled to himself; he had been made duly acquainted with all that had transpired in the music-room by his anxious mother.

"There must be some sort of an understanding between them," Laura thought, as she remarked how bright and happy Trixy looked, as she kept up her incessant chatter to Eliot, and then, the curtain rising, she resolutely turned her attention, with a sigh, to the stage.

Trixy's appearance at the opera had happened thus: On rushing from the music-room, hurt and angry and almost hating Mrs. Waldron, she had, as before mentioned, gone directly to Eliot's studio, and sobbed out her grief to him.

The young man was very indignant at his aunt's treatment of his little friend, and he at once told her to get herself up as pretty as she could, and he would take her to the opera if she would like to go.

She did wish to go very much, and her disappointment was half that made her so miserable. She would have been very glad to accompany Laura and William, but her anger at her aunt made her refuse to do so in a moment of passion. But she was happier to go with Eliot, and she danced away to her room comforted, and resolving that *he* should have no cause to be ashamed of her, set to work in good earnest to arrange something pretty to wear.

It was a very promiscuous and not very promising assortment of clothing that presented itself to her as she opened her wardrobe door and took a survey of its contents.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, almost weeping again at the rather discouraging prospect, "that crimson silk would do if I had not burned that great hole in the flounce when Dick Murray and I waltzed too near the footlights, when we were practicing for Belle Austin's private theatricals; then the white one is spoiled with a great splash of ink—of course, I had no business to try to write a letter after I was dressed for a party; but I *did,* and I'm *always* doing

what I have no business to. My black one won't do at all, though that *is* nice and fresh—it's too grave for the opera; and there's the pink one with that great grease spot all down the front, where I tipped that ice-cream into my lap. I *wish* I didn't have to live in such a muss all the time. Laura will wear a dress a dozen times, and never hurt it a bit. Oh, I know what I can do," she added, brightening with a sudden thought. "The pink one is only greasy on the front—it's fresh and pretty every other way; I'll take that white thread lace shawl that used to be mamma's, and fix it for an over-dress; it will look charming bunched up with those lovely roses I have. Then my lace bertha will do to go with it nicely. Eliot, my handsome knight of the brush, I'll do my *very* best for your artistic eyes."

And she did.

Under her deft fingers the dainty pink silk and white lace shawl, looped here and there with great bright crush roses, grew into a lovely costume, and the low corsage under its delicate bertha was extremely becoming, and, when she went down to meet Eliot at the appointed hour, she was as bewitching a little maiden as one is wont to see.

She had tied her dark hair back from her small face, something as she had done on the day when the young artist had taken the cast of her features, pinning it, securely for once, in a graceful knot, and allowing the ends to fall in rich curls over her neck. No amount of brushing would make it lie smoothly about her face, but the fluffy frizzes, falling over her forehead, only made her look the more charming.

Her eyes sparkled with anticipation, her face was bright and happy, and as Eliot threw the rich opera cloak over her shoulders and assisted her to arrange the pretty hood over her hair, he compared her to some tropical bird of brilliant plumage, and felt well repaid for the goodly sized bank-note that he had parted with to secure their tickets.

Earlier in the evening he had sought Mrs. Waldron and told her of his invitation to Trixy, and asked her sanction,

which, as her purpose regarding William and Laura had been accomplished, she very readily gave, and for once told Trixy that she "looked very well," whereupon the young damsel tossed her pretty head defiantly, and immediately lost half her own satisfaction in her personal appearance.

"Isn't Laura perfectly delightful?" she cried, as, following one of Eliot's numerous glances at that box opposite them, she saw her beautiful cousin, and without a feeling of envy gave expression to her admiration.

"Yes, Miss Preston looks unusually beautiful to-night?"

"Miss Preston, indeed! How very formal you are getting, Eliot! I suppose *I* shall be 'Miss Waldron' next; shall I begin by calling you 'Mr. Harcourt?'" the young girl asked, with a pout of her red lips.

Eliot laughed.

"No, petite, *you* will never be anything but Trixy to me, and you must not dignify me into 'mister' on any account."

"Then why do you call Laura *'miss?'* you never used to. What is the trouble between you?"

"What is the trouble between *you* and Laura?" he asked, evading her questions.

"Nothing—oh! I must tell you, Eliot," she said eagerly, and flushing with pleasure at the remembrance. "Laura told me this afternoon that she 'loved me dearly, like a sister,' and if Aunt Roxy hadn't appeared upon the scene just then, we should have made it all up. I'm afraid I haven't been quite as just to Laura as I should have been; she is the dearest girl in all the world, and I'm half-inclined to believe that Aunt Roxy makes all the fuss herself, just to torment me. There, the curtain is rising, and now 'I'll give you a rest.'"

If it was not literally a "rest," it was truly a pleasure for him to sit there and watch that bright, girlish face, so expressive of every emotion of her heart; to see it all aglow with delight, beaming with fun and merriment, then softening into tenderness and pity, the sensitive mouth quiver, the darkly fringed lids droop over the dusky eyes

that more than once filled with tears as she followed the opera through with almost breathless interest.

"Eliot, I have been just *happy* to-night!" she said, at the close of the last scene, as she impulsively clasped both small hands around his arm, and looked up into his face with grateful eyes.

And almost unconsciously he murmured Laura's words:

"It is only the giving of happiness that brings happiness."

As William Waldron sat beside Laura Preston, assiduously attending to her every want, bending toward her during the pauses in the music, and murmuring tender words in her ears, bringing the rich color to her cheek, but no responsive light to her eye or word to her lip, she knew instinctively toward what all this was tending.

At the close of the opera, when he folded her cloak about her, his arms lingered for a moment around her form, while he breathed in her ear:

"My darling, I love you."

Her averted face did not encourage him to say more just then, and drawing her hand within his arm he led her out to the carriage.

Once there she became suddenly animated, and began talking so volubly about the merits of the opera and the artists, that he could not get an opportunity to speak a single word that his lips were burning to utter.

When they reached home the house was still, though the gas was burning brightly in the hall, and the parlor was dimly, cosily inviting, with its one or two jets of flame, partially turned out, and the cheerful fire in the grate.

Trixy had come in but a few moments earlier, and had gone directly to her own room, and to all appearances every other member of the family had retired.

Laura would also gladly have escaped to her room, but William drew her resolutely into the parlor, and she tried

to nerve herself for the interview which she saw was inevitable.

"I could not say what I wished in that crowd, my beautiful darling," he said, leading her before the fire and gathering both her hands into his; "but now I must unburden all my heart to you. Laura, I have loved you for years—in fact, ever since you first came to brighten my home with your presence, but I have never felt it wise to speak of it before. Now I have reached man's estate; in a few months more I shall be ready to begin life for myself, and I must know what I have to hope for. Dearest, I want you to tell me to-night—now—that some time, not very far hence, you will be my wife."

Laura Preston looked very like a beautiful statue of snow as she stood there before him, with her long white opera-cloak falling about her, and her face as colorless as the white cashmere, and listened to these impassioned words.

Her mouth wore a pained look, her eyes were downcast, the white lids trembling.

There was utter silence in the room, but from above there came to the lovely girl's ears a sound like the tapping of a mallet upon a chisel, and that sound was dearer to her than the choicest, fondest words which this man, standing there before her and waiting for her answer to his suit, could utter.

Every tap made her heart thrill and beat in loving unison, while not one word that William Waldron had spoken had so much as moved her pulses to an answering throb.

No, she could never be her cousin's wife.

"Laura! Laura! why are you silent? Look up, my darling. Have I startled you by my abruptness? If so, forgive me, but speak one little word and tell me that I may hope," he whispered anxiously.

"William, I cannot," Laura returned sorrowfully; "your words pain me more than I can tell you. I never dreamed

that you were cherishing such feelings toward me until since your return this time, and I would have saved you this confession, but you have made me powerless in the matter."

"Ah! then I have been precipitate—I have startled you, Laura. We will say no more about it now; we will wait until I can prove how deep and true my love for you is," he said tenderly, but feeling very anxious as to the result of this interview.

The calm, sorrowful way in which she had replied to him alarmed him.

"No," she replied, withdrawing her hand from his grasp, and speaking very firmly, "there is no need to wait; we must settle this here and now for all time. I must not allow you to go on hoping for that which I can never give you. I can never be your wife, William."

"Have you no love for me—is there no response in your heart to the fierce passion in mine?" he cried excitedly.

"None in the way you mean," she answered, while a thrill of something very like aversion pervaded her.

"Laura, it cannot be true that there is no hope for me," he said passionately. "I did not dream of refusal, but I know that you are not wont to say either yea or nay without meaning it."

"I can give you no other answer, William; believe me, if I truly loved you I should not hesitate to tell you so; but I could be no man's wife unless I loved him with my whole heart. Let me be your friend always, as I have been in the past, but do not, I pray, ever revert to this subject again, for at no time could I give you a different answer," and he knew his fate was sealed. Neither Laura Preston nor Laura Preston's fortune could ever be anything to him.

A great wave of passion swept through his heart.

"Then you love some one else," he cried fiercely; "you could never speak in this way if you did not love some one else."

Her slight form, which had drooped a trifle while she

thought she was giving him pain, straightened now; the small head assumed the proud poise that was natural to it, and the deep-blue eyes, which she now raised and flashed full upon his face, had a little warning gleam in them.

"It is very late, I think," she said, in proud, quiet tones. "Good-night, William."

She held out her hand, as if she would still be friendly with him if he did not presume too far; but with a white face and lowering brow he turned sharply away from it and her, and with a low, sullenly muttered "good-night," walked quickly from the room.

But the look that he shot back at her over his shoulder as he reached the door boded the fair girl no good, if ever the opportunity for revenge should be offered to him.

CHAPTER V

"I SHALL NEVER FORGIVE IT."

WILLIAM WALDRON met his mother at the head of the stairs.

She had heard the young couple come in and go into the parlor, and she had sat almost breathless, listening to the low murmur of their voices below.

Would he succeed? Would Laura Preston's fortune be secured to the family and William's future prosperity be determined?

She was very, very anxious as to the issue of the interview, so anxious that when she heard her son leave the parlor and come slowly up the stairs she glided out of her room and met him at the top.

His look startled her. It was moody, sullen, disappointed, angry.

"William?" she breathed questioningly, a ring of fear in her tone.

He gave a short, harsh laugh.

"I have *failed*—most *miserably,*" he said fiercely.

"*No!*" she exclaimed, growing pale, "you *shall* not fail in this."

"I tell you I *have* failed!" he answered angrily, and then pushing by her almost rudely, he proceeded to his own room.

Mrs. Waldron stood for a moment or two where he had left her, her face white, set, wicked.

Then, with a gleam of resolution in her cold eyes and lips firmly compressed, she glided swiftly down the stairs and into the parlor.

Laura was still standing before the grate, where William had left her.

She looked sad and troubled and her attitude was drooping, but she glanced up with a smile as her aunt entered and asked kindly:

"Is your head better, Aunt Roxy?"

"My head is all right," Mrs. Waldron answered curtly.

Then she added with a searching glance at her beautiful niece:

"I met William on the stairs as I came down. He told me what had happened. What does it mean, Laura?"

Laura flushed a vivid scarlet.

She did not suppose that William would be willing to tell even his mother of his failure in a matter so delicate.

There was something, too, in her aunt's tone that jarred upon her nerves, a note of warning or threatening that aroused her antagonism and made her feel very uncomfortable.

She grows cold and proud at once; almost unconsciously her small, shining head is lifted a trifle haughtily, while she turns, with a look of surprise in her sapphire eyes, toward Mrs. Waldron.

"It means, Aunt Roxy, just what I suppose he has already told you—that I cannot marry William," she said simply, yet meeting those cold eyes unflinchingly.

"And why not, pray?" Mrs. Roxena demands, somewhat sharply, and forgetting in her anger and disappointment that a maiden's heart is something that it will not do to handle roughly.

"Because I do not love him; he is not the man I should choose for a husband," was the straightforward reply.

"Indeed! and what may be your objection to William as a husband?" Mrs. Roxena inquired, with a scintillant gleam from under her lowering brows.

"Aunt Roxy," Laura said appealingly, "do not be angry with me for what I cannot help; you know, or you ought to know, that the heart must choose for itself. I have never thought of such a thing as marrying my cousin——"

"Ah! then it is because he is your *cousin* that you object to him," Mrs. Waldron interrupted eagerly, something of hope animating her; "why, hundreds of girls marry their cousins."

"No; it is, as I said before, because I do not love him. I cannot tell you, Aunt Roxy," Laura went on, in a husky voice, "how sorry I am to pain William, and, as I perceive, also disappoint you; but my conscience would never allow me to become any man's wife unless I could give him my whole heart with my hand."

"Girl, girl, you do not know what you are doing! I will not have my boy's life ruined like this," Mrs. Waldron said, almost fiercely; "it has been the hope of my life ever since you came here to live."

Laura trembled before her fierce passion. Mrs. Waldron had always treated her with kindness, although she had never appeared to feel any very deep affection for her, and it was not in the girl's nature to be ungrateful for the care she had received for so many years. She was deeply pained now by what her aunt told her, and by the evidence of her great disappointment, and when she uttered those last words she dropped her face upon her hands with a cry of dismay.

Mrs. Waldron took courage and went on:

"I know, Laura, that you are very stubborn when once you make up your mind, but for all our sakes be very careful how you make it up this time; you do not mean that you will *never* marry William?" her voice dropped into a pleading tone, as she said this.

"Yes, that is what I mean; I could never love him as a wife should love her husband, and I could not do him the wrong, I could not do myself the wrong, to marry him without loving him."

"Do you think I can bear this? You shall *learn* to love him," returned Mrs. Waldron, bending toward Laura, and speaking in a low though intense tone.

"Dear Aunt Roxy"—Laura was curbing her proud heart and bearing with her because of her supposed suffering—"do not be so angry with me. Do you think it is a light thing to me to disappoint you and pain William thus? Ah! comfort me a little, I have no mother to go to, and do not blame me so severely."

"Promise me that you will marry my boy and I will do anything in the world for you."

"I cannot do that, Aunt Roxy."

Very low and gently, but very firmly as well, were the words spoken.

"Laura Preston, you will make an enemy of me if you blight this hope of mine."

Laura turned and looked at her aunt, surprised into calmness by her strange words.

Her face wore a dark and malignant expression, and her flashing, angry eye plainly indicated that she was equal to the task of proving her assertion true.

"Aunt Roxy," Laura said quietly but very gravely, "you wrong yourself, you wrong the name of woman, and your son as well, when you seek to drive me into a marriage that is repulsive to me. I do not wish to make an enemy of you, for you have always been kind to me heretofore, and I appreciate it, but I could not promise to wed a man

I do not love under *any* circumstances. I can give you no different answer, even though it may serve to alienate you entirely from me."

And Mrs. Waldron knew that further words would but be like so much empty sound—her cause was lost!

"You will live to be sorry for this night's work, Laura Preston," she said ominously; "I shall never forgive it, and if there ever comes a time when I can be revenged upon you for it, you may be very sure that I shall not neglect the opportunity."

Without giving the amazed girl time to reply, the disappointed, worldly woman left the room, never dreaming how soon her threat would be verified; while Laura, startled and distressed beyond measure by this new phase of her aunt's character, sank down by the fire and gave way to a violent fit of weeping.

The chiming of the midnight hour finally aroused her, and she crept sorrowfully away to her own room.

She felt almost like an alien and an outcast; it was the darkest hour she had known since that sad day when she had looked her last upon the face of her dead mother, and seen her carried out forever from the home where she had been the chief charm and joy.

She listened a moment at Trixy's door; but all was still within, and with a sad and lonely heart she laid aside her beautiful garments and crept into bed.

But no sleep came to soothe her excited nerves; no rest to her weary, trembling frame.

For more than an hour she lay tossing from side to side, those last heartless, threatening words of Mrs. Waldron's ringing constantly in her ears, and trying to imagine what the wretched future would be like.

How should she meet Mrs. Waldron in the morning, and face William, knowing that she was regarded as an enemy and a marplot by both?

At last she could bear it no longer.

She arose, tucked her feet into a pair of velvet slippers,

and throwing a light shawl over her shoulders, she stole softly to the door between her own and Trixy's room.

"Are you awake, Trixy?" she asked, as she gently opened it.

"Yes. What is it, Laura?" the young girl asked, starting up from her pillow.

"I am very nervous. May I come in with you?"

"Yes, do!" was the hearty response; and as Laura crept in beside her, she nestled close to her and threw her arm about her neck.

The fond act unnerved Laura again, and she fell to crying almost hysterically.

"What *is* the matter, Laura? I never saw you act so before," Trixy said, surprised and alarmed.

"I have made Aunt Roxy very, very angry with me to-night, and she has said such hard, such dreadful things to me!" Laura sobbed, glad to pour her trouble into a sympathetic ear.

"Was that what kept you so long down stairs?"

"Yes."

"I have been listening for you for an age. I think I must have taken cold to-night, for I have shivered ever since I came home, and my head aches fearfully, and Trixy rolled her head restlessly on the pillow.

"What was it Aunt Roxy said to you?" she asked after a moment; then, as Laura could not answer for her sobs, she added:

"Never mind; you shall tell me about it to-morrow. I never dreamed she *could* say anything to hurt *you;* but, Laura, there are times when I believe I absolutely hate Aunt Roxy. It's wicked, I know, to say it, but she goads me beyond endurance. Oh, dear! how my head does ache!" and Trixy moaned with pain.

Laura was startled out of her own misery by it, for Trixy was not wont to complain.

She reached out her hand and laid it against her cheek. It was burning with fever.

"You are ill," she said. "I have a flask of *eau de cologne* in my room. I will get it, and bathe your head."

"No; do not move, please, every motion hurts me terribly. Try and go to sleep now; I shall be better in the morning, perhaps," Trixy tried to say cheerfully, but her little white teeth were locked together with pain, though she forced herself to lie still so that Laura need not be disturbed.

They did not speak again, and Laura, soothed and comforted by Trixy's sympathy, finally dropped asleep, but only to dream of being forced over a frightful precipice into a deep and yawning abyss, while her aunt stood by, laughing and mocking at her misery.

Strange noises, too, seemed to mingle with her dreams —low, muttering sounds that thrilled her with pain and terror, mingled now and then with a laugh that made her flesh creep.

Then suddenly she was broad awake, to find Trixy sitting up in bed, and as the moon shone in cold and bright through the window, she could see her eyes shining like coals of fire, her cheeks ablaze with fever, while she was muttering and raving in delirium.

Greatly alarmed, she sprang up, ran quickly across the hall, knocked upon Mrs. Waldron's door, and called out:

"Aunt Roxy, get up quickly, please—Trixy is very ill."

Then she ran back to her cousin's room, lighted the gas, and tried to quiet the excited girl.

But she was beyond the power of reason.

"Laura, Laura!" she cried, with a frightened glance around, "don't let Aunt Roxy know that I told you, but she says you have grown to dislike me—that I am a continual annoyance to you. I've tried to keep out of your way, indeed I have, but it has been so hard, because I love you—I do truly," she went on, in a plaintive way that made Laura's heart ache, "and if there is anything in the world that I can do to make you love me again, I'll do it. I'll tell you a secret, Laura," she said, dropping her voice to a whisper, and clasping her hands across her aching

brow, "I'm all on fire; *you* can't see it, but the little flames have been creeping all over me all night. I began to burn a long time ago, only it was away in deep out of sight. Aunt Roxy's heart is a piece of flint and her tongue a steel hammer, and she has kept striking sparks at me for so long that she has at last set me afire. Don't you see how I burn? —oh, it's dreadful, dreadful! How long will it last, do you suppose? But I could bear it better if you would only love me a little."

"Hush, Trixy, dear!" Laura said, almost sobbing aloud, "I do love you, my darling. Lie down and let me bathe your head. Ah! how hot these poor little hands are," and wetting a towel, she began to bathe them tenderly.

"Hot? yes, you don't know how hot—they've been burning all night, I tell you, and I could not put the fire out. Oh, my head, my head! Look at my hair, Laura—it has all turned into snakes and reptiles, like Medusa's; I can feel them squirm and wriggle. Aunt Roxy will think I'm a worse fright than ever," she said, with a wild laugh. Then with a look of fear as she pressed her hand to her throbbing temples: "If they should sting and bite me, Laura, I should die, and I don't want to die now—I want to try and make you love me a little first.' "

Mrs. Waldron entered the room at this moment, and Trixy seeing her, motioned her back with a wild shriek.

"Laura, save me!" she cried. "Here comes that old Gordon with the evil eye—don't let her fix it on me—one look from her will turn me into stone, then she will forever strike sparks from me to torture some one else!" and the poor girl clung to Laura as if in mortal terror, hiding her face upon her neck and trembling in every limb.

Mrs. Waldron instantly turned and left the room. She saw at a glance that Trixy was indeed alarmingly ill, and her presence added to her frenzy.

She aroused the servants, sent for a physician, and then arming herself with fresh towels and ice-water, returned

to the sick-room to do what she could until the doctor arrived.

But Trixy would not allow her to come near her; she insisted that she was that hideous Gorgon of the Greek mythology whose glance turned every one to stone, and appeared so frightened and distressed that Mrs. Waldron was obliged to beat a retreat, leaving Laura to minister to her alone, with the help of a servant, until the physician should arrive.

"I am not a fright," Trixy muttered after she had gone, and Laura had succeeded in making her lie down, while she bathed her head. "Go find Eliot—he can tell you all about it. I am beautiful—as beautiful as you are, Laura, if you see me right—only it is a different kind of beauty. Go bring Eliot—he shall tell you about it."

"Yes, darling, Eliot shall come," Laura said soothingly; "but, Trixy dear, you have always been beautiful to me;" and talking in this strain Laura made her lie comparatively still until the doctor came, though she kept up that incessant muttering.

"She is very dangerously ill," the doctor said, with a very grave face. "She must have the closest attention, and my directions must be strictly followed or I will not answer for her life."

When told how the presence of Mrs. Waldron excited her, he said at once and very decidedly:

"She must not go near her then; I will send a professional nurse within an hour, and the house must be very quiet."

So Mrs. Waldron was banished from the sick-room, much to her chagrin; a professional nurse was installed, who, with Laura's assistance—for Trixy would not be easy a moment if she was absent from her side—took all the care of the invalid.

She called for Eliot incessantly, and as soon as he came to his studio, which was not until late in the afternoon, for he had business away that day, they went for him.

His presence seemed to quiet her at once. She looked up at him with a smile.

"You know all about it, Eliot," she said; "tell them—tell Laura that I love her, and that I am not a fright."

"Yes, he would tell them," he said; and then he sat down beside her, holding her hot hands in his, and talking in a low, soothing tone, until the wild, restless eyes grew heavy and dull, the flushed lids fell over them, the anxious, pain-lined face settled into repose, and she slept.

"Poor child," he murmured, as he bent over her, a terrible fear written on his face, "she has been tortured to the verge of madness—poor, careless, sensitive, loving Trixy! God grant that you may come safely out of this peril!"

CHAPTER VI

THE CRISIS

"You must not remain here," Eliot Harcourt said to Laura, as he turned from Trixy's bedside, after the utterance of that fervent petition. "This fever is contagious; you are in great danger."

"I surely shall not leave her," she said quietly but resolutely, as she softly changed the steaming towel on Trixy's hot head.

"Have you no fear on your own account?" he asked, regarding her searchingly.

"No; and if I had it would make no difference; she likes to have me here, and I shall stay as long as she needs me," she answered, with a wistful look at the flushed, restless sleeper.

"Have you been out in the air to-day? have you eaten anything," the young artist asked in a gentler tone than he had used before, and a relaxing of the firm lines about his mouth.

"I have eaten a little," she admitted reluctantly, "but I have not been out; I could not while she was so wild."

"Come with me for a few minutes," Eliot said, reaching down and taking one of her hands; "the nurse is here and will do everything that is necessary, and I promise to keep you but a little while," he added, as he saw her wander again to the crimson face upon the pillow with an anxious glance.

She arose, though somewhat unwillingly, and he led her across the hall into his studio.

Taking a heavy afghan that lay upon the sofa, he wrapped it around her, threw one corner of it over her head, then leading her to the opposite side of the room, he opened another door, and together they went down a flight of stairs, by a side door, into a small inclosure or garden.

This was the way by which Eliot Harcourt always gained access to his studio, instead of entering the house by the main hall.

Here he drew Laura's arm within his, and made her walk briskly up and down the path three or four times.

The keen, pure air put a trifle of life-like color into her white face, and gave a brighter light to her heavy eyes.

"Now I will let you go in again, if you will promise to go down to the dining-room and eat a substantial meal," he said, stopping opposite the door, and all unconscious of how tenderly he was looking into her eyes.

The blood rushed to her temples, and she turned quickly from him, as if to enter the house.

"I will promise to eat all that I can," she said, with a slight smile, and glancing back at him over her shoulder as she ascended the stairs.

They reëntered the studio, and as Laura was passing a work-table she ran against a screen that was placed before a bust, knocking it to the floor.

"Trixy!" she gasped, and bent eagerly toward it.

Then realizing all at once that the life-like figure was only a bust, she burst into nervous weeping.

It was as if she felt it might not be long before that

would be all that would remain to remind them of the girl she loved so well.

"Laura!" Eliot said, in remorseful tones, and springing forward to replace the screen, while he, too, experienced a thrill of pain as the perfect face met his eye, "it is too bad that you should have seen it just at this time; in fact, I did not mean that you or any one should see it at all. It was only a foolish whim of mine to ascertain what I could do, and to please poor Trixy, who has mourned so over being called a fright. It has given you a fearful shock, poor child! you are trembling with nervousness."

And truly Laura was very much excited over the event.

" I thought for an instant that it was Trixy, her very self," she said with chattering teeth. "When did you do it, Eliot? Let me look again."

She pushed aside the screen and bent to examine it more closely.

"Less than two weeks ago," he answered, and then he related how he had come to do it.

"It is absolutely perfect," she said in low, awe-struck tones, "and you have painted it so that one, even at this distance, would almost declare that it was alive. The hair, too! where did you get hair so like it?"

"That was a very easy matter," he said, arranging one of the heavy curls that was a little misplaced.

"Has Aunt Roxy seen it?" Laura asked.

"*No!*" Eliot answered, with compressed lips.

"I wish she might; she would never call Trixy a fright again; she is positively beautiful. But, oh! I am afraid Trixy is not going to get well," Laura said, with quivering lips.

"Then Mrs. Waldron may thank herself for having done the mischief," Eliot Harcourt said sternly. "I believe that the child has been made so unhappy and her nerves so wrought upon that it has actually driven her into this illness."

"Do you think so?" Laura asked, with a startled glance

at him, while she suddenly remembered what power her aunt seemed to possess, to make *her* miserable even during that one interview of the night previous.

"Yes. Do you not hear how she raves over it continually when she is awake?"

"I know; and I fear she has been very unhappy for the past two months, while Aunt Roxy has seemed to convey to her the impression that I was estranged from her."

"You are not, are you, Laura? You do feel kindly toward her, I hope, for Trixy loves you very dearly," Eliot said, regarding her closely.

She looked surprised and put out her hands with a gesture of pain.

"What have I done?—is that why?—do *you, too,* think I do not love Trixy?" she said brokenly and almost passionately.

Then she added with a sob:

"If she dies my heart will break."

A tear sprang to the young artist's eye.

"Of course, you love her; no one has any right to doubt it. Come away," he continued, gently, drawing her away from the table, for her eyes lingered, as with fascination, upon the figure there. "We will hope for the best. Trixy is young and strong; many have been as ill as she is and recovered," but his own heart was strangely depressed as he said it.

"But you must not give way like this, Laura," he went on, for she was weeping bitterly, "for it wastes your strength. If you are determined to remain in the sick-room, you must do everything possible to preserve your own health. Will you go down now to the dining-room and eat a good 'square meal?' "

He tried to smile cheerfully as he made the request, and he was wholly unaware of the tenderness of both his words and manner. His coldness and pride were all gone, and in spite of her anxiety for Trixy, Laura's heart leaped within her and her cheek was bright with a strange delight.

"Yes, I will go," she answered obediently.

He led her to the door and watched her as she descended the stairs, then suddenly seeming to remember himself, his face grew stern and gloomy, and turning quickly, he shut himself within his room.

The days went by—weary, anxious days—days of suspense, of heart-breaking fears and hoping against hope.

Every hour Trixy seemed to grow worse.

Her fever burned hotter and fiercer, and as her strength waned her wild frenzy subsided into low, indistinct mutterings, which were even worse to bear than her nervous delirium had been. Then these also ceased, and she lay in a sort of stupor, taking no notice of anyone or anything.

Mrs. Waldron could now enter the room without fear of exciting her, and she took up her post by the bedside, and assumed her share of watching and attendance.

"There is no hope," the physician said on the fourth day, and he added that in all his experience he had never seen a fever run such riot in so short a time, and he would give them no encouragement that her strength could last until it had had its course.

So they sat and watched her in a sort of hopeless despair.

Laura is nearly crushed; her face only a few days ago so round and beautiful, has become wan and haggard with watching and weeping; her eyes are sunken, with great dark circles around them, and heart-breaking misery in them. She has scarcely left that bedside during all those weary hours.

Must she die?—this bright, witty, careless, saucy Trixy Waldron? The life of the house they all know she has been, and beloved by every member of the family, saving her cold, heartless aunt; even by the meanest servant the merry, heedless girl had been beloved. In spite of her careless ways, her heedless habits, her sometimes passionate temper, she had twined herself round every heart save

one, as the swollen eyes and heavy sighs all about her plainly testify.

Mrs. Waldron alone sits calm, cold, watchful, hopeful, giving the proper remedies at the proper time, never faltering in any duty, never shrinking at the thought of the approaching King of Terrors. She is like a block of granite, or perhaps more properly an automatic machine. Ever and anon she casts her eye upon that drooping figure, with its white, despairing face, that sits opposite, and there is a hard look on it that does not speak well for Laura's future.

She has been calculating the chances. If Trixy dies, her fortune doubles Laura's at once, and she has said that she *will not marry William!*

Three hundred thousand plus three hundred thousand make six hundred thousand—more than half a million. There will be no driving Trixy now into marriage with Fred; *that* chance is gone, but Albert Waldron's wealth must not, *shall not* go out of the family.

So the minutes are ticked off into hours as she sits there and computes the thousands which for so many years she has been scheming to sweep into her own coffers.

Then there comes that solemn night when the doctor says the end is near, a night when no one in all the house thinks of rest or sleep, a night when the physician does not go away, when Mr. Waldron paces back and forth in the drawing-room below, pale and anxious; when Eliot Harcourt stands leaning outside Trixy's door, watching like some stern sentinel, as if to defend with his life the citadel and prevent the dread enemy from entering—a night when Laura, as she heard those dread words lifted her face with a despairing look that the physician never forgot, and clutching his hand breathed:

"Don't!—oh! *give* me *one little ray of hope!*"

"Dear child, I cannot give you what I have not myself," he had whispered pityingly, feeling a painful tight-

ening in his throat, as he saw her sink shivering back like some beaten, hunted animal.

Once after that she glanced up, and saw Eliot Harcourt's anxious face looking in at the door.

Their eyes met—in his there was a look of pity, sorrow, and—yes—love! in hers one of mute appeal.

It was but the flash of an instant, but there was a gleam of comfort in it. She knew that if the pale messenger must come, there was no one to whom she could turn and find sympathy.

The chiming of a clock below all at once beat on the stillness of the night with painful distinctness. Laura shuddered; to her it was like the flapping of Death's sable wings above his prey.

The doctor arose and went noiselessly to the bedside, touched the pulse of the sleeper, and passed his hand across her brow.

Every eye was upon him, but his own was fixed upon his patient and he gave no sign of either hope or fear For half an hour he stood there motionless, then he turned and beckoned the nurse to him, whispering something in her ear.

She immediately left the room, but soon returned bearing a cup in her hand.

What did it mean? Was the dread enemy retreating?

Another fifteen minutes passed and then there was a feeble stir upon the bed.

"Laura," came in a faint whisper from the pillow.

Laura gasped for breath, but making no other sign she reached out and clasped the small hand that lay upon the coverlid.

The doctor touched his patient's lips with the mixture in the cup.

Trixy swallowed it, opened her eyes and glanced up wonderingly into the earnest faces bending over her.

The physician gave her another spoonful from the cup; again she swallowed it eagerly, then the darkly fringed lids

drooped, a sigh parted the almost hueless lips, and Trixy dropped into an easy slumber; the fever heat changed to gentle moisture, the wild delirium and mutterings to stupor and rest, and the doubtful crisis is passed.

Then the faithful doctor heaves a sigh of relief.

"By my life, madam," he breathes to Mrs. Waldron, "that was the narrowest bridge I ever saw a mortal cross."

He turned to look at Laura.

She had sunk back in her chair faint, panting.

He threw one strong arm around her and half-bore her out into the hall.

"You must go and rest now," he said authoritatively. "I believe the worst is over, that she will live now, and you——"

He did not finish the sentence, for Laura swayed, staggered, and then dropped into the arms of Eliot Harcourt, who sprang forward to catch her.

"She has fainted, and no wonder. She's the pluckiest little piece I ever saw. Take her to her room and I'll come after I've had another look at my patient," the doctor said, turning back into Trixy's room.

"My darling! my darling! I will call you so just for this once," Eliot whispered, folding the limp, slender form close to him as he carried her to her chamber and laid her upon her bed.

The good doctor came soon, and it was not long before he succeeded in restoring her to consciousness, after which he gave her a strong sleeping potion, and with peace in her heart, and a smile of hope on her lips, she was soon wrapped in a heavy slumber.

CHAPTER VII

"THAT IS YOUR WORK!"

It was nearly noon of the day following the events of the last chapter, when Laura awoke from her deep sleep.

A servant was sitting quietly beside her, for they did not like to leave her alone.

"How is she?" she asked, glancing anxiously toward Trixy's room—her first thought for her.

"Better, but weak as a baby, miss," answered the girl.

"I must go to her," Laura said, trying to rise.

"No; the doctor's orders are that no one but the nurse is to be with her to-day, and Mr. Harcourt said you was to drink this as soon as you awoke," and the girl presented a cup.

So Laura drank the strong, savory beef-tea, which Eliot had taken care should be prepared for her, then lay contentedly down again to sleep, and did not wake until midnight.

Of course, she could not go to Trixy then, and when morning broke she had a ringing headache, and thus was compelled to keep her bed for another day.

Frequent bulletins were brought to her from Trixy's room, however; she was doing as well as could be expected, but very, very weak still, and no one but the nurse knew as yet of the grave, uneasy look and suspicious of the physician when he had come the morning following the crisis to look at his patient.

"She does not breathe right," he said. "I do not like the way her heart beats or her pulse feels."

He cautioned the nurse to watch her closely through the day, and send for him if there was the slightest change.

In the afternoon he came again, but it was not until the second morning that he would pronounce her really better, and all day long the girl slept and rested, only arousing long enough at intervals to take a little nourishment.

It was nearly dusk of the second day when Laura insisted upon getting up to go and see for herself how Trixy was.

She was dizzy and unsteady on her feet at first, but

after she had eaten and taken a cup of strong tea, she felt quite refreshed and like herself once more.

She found Trixy sleeping, and the weary nurse dozing beside her, and so sat quietly down by the bedside, where she could watch that dear face upon the pillow, while she wept softly for gratitude that the danger, as she believed, was past.

Then the servant, shod in softest and most noiseless of list slippers, came to light the gas, the nurse aroused, and Laura, seeing how weary and spent she looked, begged her to go down stairs and get a cup of tea, saying that she would watch with Trixy while she was absent.

There were no medicines to be given for over an hour, the sick girl had taken nourishment just before going to sleep; there was nothing to be done but sit beside her, and the weary woman thankfully accepted Laura's offer and went below.

The family were all at tea, the servants engaged about their duties, and these two were alone up stairs.

It was very quiet—intensely quiet, but it was a beautiful, peaceful, holy stillness to Laura, whose heart gave a thankful throb for every soft breath that Trixy drew. It was so different from that other horrible silence of two nights ago, when every nerve was strained to its utmost tension with suspense and dread.

She had been sitting thus for perhaps fifteen minutes when Trixy awoke.

She smiled gladly when she saw Laura, and reached out her hand to her.

The grateful girl clasped it, and then Trixy drew her toward her, putting up her lips for a kiss.

She gave it with trembling lips and brimming eyes.

"It seems as if I had been shut up in the dark for an age," Trixy whispered.

"I know, dear," Laura murmured, "but it will be all right now. You will soon be well again."

Trixy looked up at her with solemn eyes.

"I do not feel quite sure about it, Laura," she said gravely.

A sudden pang shot through Laura's heart.

"But the doctor says you are better, Trixy," she returned quickly.

"Yes, but I feel very strangely here every little while," and she laid her hand over her heart.

"Do not talk about it, dear; you are very weak, and have been fearfully ill, so it is not strange that you feel badly."

It was very still again for the space of five minutes, then Trixy drew Laura's hand to her side.

"Feel," she said, while her breath was labored and irregular.

Laura was startled to find underneath her hand, violent, uneven pulsations, while at the same time she was exceedingly alarmed by Trixy's appearance.

Her face was ghastly, her hands were clenched with pain, and she seemed almost in a suffocating condition for a moment.

Then it passed away, and she grew quiet once more, though the cold sweat stood about her mouth and on her forehead.

"It is dreadful," she gasped.

"I will call nurse," Laura said, dreading a return of the distress, and half rising to put her words into action.

"No, do not leave me; it has passed, and may not come again for a long time," Trixy said, clinging to her.

And so she sat still, but anxiously watched every movement of the sick girl.

Presently she felt her hand close convulsively over hers.

"It is coming again," Trixy gasped. "Lift me up, Laura, I can't breathe."

"Quick, quick!" she urged, as Laura slowly raised her head from the pillow. "Oh——"

The suffering girl gave two or three little gasps, then

her head fell helplessly back over her cousin's arm, and her face settled into rigid lines.

"Help! she has fainted—oh! come quickly, some one!" Laura cried wildly; then as no one appeared to hear her, she laid her gently down, and turned to fly for aid.

She ran blindly into some one at the door in her frightened haste.

It was Mrs. Waldron, who, coming up the stairs, had heard her cry and hastened forward.

"What is the matter?" she demanded sternly, after one quick glance at the still form upon the bed.

"Trixy has fainted. I must go for nurse," and she rushed wildly away.

The nurse was not long in reaching her charge, but a look of horror sprang into her eyes as she marked the rigid face, felt for the pulse, and placed her hand over the heart.

There was no breath; no pulsation; all was horribly still.

"Go for the doctor instantly," she commanded, and swift feet flew to obey her.

Doctor Sutherland came, but it was with a look from which they could gain no encouragement.

"She is dead," he said, after one critical glance at that still form.

The words were like a thunderbolt.

There was one brief moment of horrified silence, then there came the heart-breaking wail:

"No, no, not *dead!* Trixy *must* not die!" Laura cried, in tones that pierced every heart.

"My poor child, she is already gone. I have feared something of the kind, for her heart has not been right during all her sickness."

Then he asked how it happened; he had not thought it could come *quite* so suddenly as this.

The nurse said she had been troubled about her breathing once or twice during the day, but the turn passed, and she had thought no more of it.

Laura, then, with trembling lips, related the terrible spasms which she had been seized with while the nurse had been absent.

"Oh! can nothing be done?" she moaned, wringing her hands and appealing to him.

"Nothing," he answered sadly.

"Oh, Trixy, Trixy!" she cried wildly, burying her face in the bed-clothes. "I cannot have it so! I was so sure she would get well!"

"Hush!" sternly commanded Mrs. Waldron, bending down and putting her lips close to her ear. "You only do yourself injury by assuming such wild grief. I suppose I do not need to remind you that this event makes Trixy's fortune yours."

Laura started up aghast, shrinking from the woman with horror.

What did she mean? and what did that strange, ominous glitter in her eyes portend?

"Go to your room, this is no place for *you* now," Mrs. Waldron continued, taking her firmly by the arm and drawing her away from the bedside, and with one last, agonized look at that loved face on the pillow, the beautiful girl tottered from the room and sought her own.

Chilled and shivering, and miserable beyond expression, she crept into her bed, and lay listening, as if petrified, to those subdued voices and horribly suggestive movements in the adjoining room.

For hours—it seemed ages—she never moved, her hands locked in a painful clasp, her eyes wide and staring, her brain on fire, her heart breaking.

Trixy dead! Gone! Where?

"Where is she? where and how shall I ever find her again?" she cried at last, breaking the spell that bound her and reaching out her hands helplessly into the darkness.

She could not realize it; she could not believe it. Only one short week ago she had been so bright, so beautiful, so

happy with Eliot at the opera. It could not be that in seven short days her life had been consumed, had burned down to its socket and gone out—that her heart had beat out life's measure, and the music of her merry, blithesome voice was hushed forever.

"I cannot believe it—I cannot believe it," she moaned, as the night wore on, and the first gray, dreary light of dawn began to steal over the sky.

She raised her head from her pillow with a weary sigh and listened.

There was no sound anywhere in all the great house.

What had they done with her dear one? Had they closed her eyes, folded her hands over her still heart, and then gone calmly to their rest, leaving her alone?

It was a cruel thought to her—Trixy dead, and alone!

She crept shiveringly out of her bed, glided softly to the door between their rooms. She turned the handle, pushed it open and entered.

One glance at the low bed made her gasp for breath, for underneath the ghastly sheet which covered it she could trace the outlines of a motionless form.

The gas was burning, but turned very low, and the room was cold and gloomy, almost sepulchral in its chill dreariness.

As if drawn by some horrible fascination, Laura stole noiselessly to the bedside, turned back the sheet with trembling hands, and looked at the dear, dead face beneath.

Scarce had she done so when she felt an iron grasp upon her shoulder, and turning quickly and with a moan of terror, she found herself confronted by Mrs. Waldron, who demanded in inflexible tones:

"What are *you* here for? I should suppose, after the deadly mischief you have done, that you would wish to keep as far from this room as possible."

"I could not stay away, Aunt Roxy," Laura said mourn-

fully, and not heeding the ominous import of her aunt's words.

"I wanted to see Trixy; I could not make it seem real that she was—d—gone."

Her white lips quivered painfully, while she stood with locked hands and heaving bosom looking upon that still countenance, so white and rigid.

"I wonder how you dare to come near her," Mrs. Waldron returned severely.

Laura looked up at her surprised; it had just penetrated her brain that her aunt's words sounded very strangely.

"I do not understand you," she said. "What mischief have I done? Why should I not dare come near Trixy?"

"Do you ask why? I should think you would fear she would rise up to accuse you."

"Accuse me? Accuse me of what?"

"Accuse you of what!" repeated the woman mockingly. "Your innocence is well assumed, but you cannot deceive *me*. Do you think that I do not know what you have done? That, *that is your work*," and she pointed solemnly to the shrouded figure upon the bed, while her eyes were fixed malignantly upon Laura's colorless face.

"*My work!*" Laura gasped, her eyes dilating with a look of wildness.

"Yes, your work; for you, and you alone, are responsible for Trixy's death."

"*Aunt Roxy!*" almost shrieked the horror-stricken girl, while she shrunk back affrighted at the dreadful words.

"Hush!" commanded her companion, grasping her arm almost fiercely, "if you betray yourself like that you are lost. Listen to me. The doctor says that Trixy died of spasmodic affection of the heart, *but I know better*. She was doing well enough—she was beginning to recover, and we all hoped she was going to get well. We are all down stairs excepting the nurse, who is weary and sleepy; you come in here and coax her to go below, saying you will watch your cousin while she refreshes herself with a cup

of tea; you are alone with her for more than half an hour; I find the nurse in the kitchen sitting over the fire and chatting with the servants; chide her for leaving her charge alone in such inexperienced hands and hasten here at once. What do I find? You frightened, trembling like a guilty thing, and your cousin dead in your arms. Do you understand me now!"

"No, Aunt Roxy," Laura said in a hollow tone, and with a face that seemed frozen, it was so rigid and colorless, "I cannot comprehend anything so horrible as what your words seem to imply."

"Then I will *make* myself understood. I will speak so plainly that you cannot fail to comprehend me. *I accuse you of having murdered your cousin.*"

CHAPTER VIII

WHO IS THE GUILTY ONE?

THERE was a death-like silence for a few seconds after this startling, awful, diabolic charge, while those two women stood facing each other.

One with a cold, merciless look, and with a malignant purpose stamped upon her face; the other pallid, trembling, her eyes almost starting from their sockets. She cannot move; she seems petrified with terror, frozen to the spot, her gaze glued upon that countenance, which all at once has become almost like that of a demon to her.

Then out of that profound stillness there comes a low, heart-breaking, terrified moan.

"Aunt Roxy! Aunt Roxy! are you mad? Has Trixy's sudden death crazed you, that you say such fearful things to me?" Laura's stiffened lips whisper, while her words come between pants of agony.

"Not at all."

"You must be—yes, you must be insane, or you would never dream of accusing me of *that,*" and she shuddered as she glanced at that marble face opposite them.

"No, I assure you I am in full possession of all my faculties, and yet I accuse you of *willful murder.*"

"*Don't!*" cried the stricken girl, shrinking away from her and throwing out her hands wildly, "what—*what* can you mean? Why should you suspect me of anything so dreadful?"

"I do not forget the conditions of your uncle's will, that if either of you were to die, the survivor should have the other's portion."

"Are you utterly heartless? Do you think that for paltry gold——" interrupted Laura indignantly.

"Be still until I have done," Mrs. Waldron commanded sternly. "I have watched you all through Trixy's sickness, and while others believed that you were suffering with anxiety—that your pallor, your tears, your sleeplessness, were all for fear she would die, *I* knew that it was for just the reverse—because you were afraid she would *not* die. Your disappointment was so overpowering that you *fainted* when the doctor said that she would live. You need not speak; I am not to be deceived," Mrs. Waldron continued, as Laura's lips moved. "You and Trixy have been at swords' points, so to speak, for a long time; you have avoided her, and shown your jealousy and dislike of her in many ways. Others have noticed it as well as I, and now when you found that the crisis had passed, and that there was every reason to hope that she would get well, you resolved that she should not; you wanted her money to add to your fortune, and *you killed her.*

"You *know* that you are speaking falsehoods, Mrs. Waldron," Laura returned; but her tones shook like a very aged person's, and she trembled so violently that it was all she could do to stand.

"That will be for *you* to *prove,*" was the calm reply.

"Was this what you meant to insinuate last evening

when you said I would only injure myself by assuming such wild grief—that you did not need to remind me that Trixy's fortune would be mine now?"

"No. I believe you were glad she was dead, but I had no proof of what you had done then."

"Aunt Roxy Waldron, I ask you in the presence of God, do you *really believe* that I would do anything so perfectly dreadful?" Laura demanded solemnly.

Mrs. Waldron's complexion changed to a dull gray at this question, but her eyes flashed a strange look at her companion as she returned:

"That question will seem like a mockery to you, when I tell you that I have it in my power to *prove* it."

"You *cannot* prove it, for I am guilty of no wrong," Laura said firmly.

"But I have the evidence here in this very room."

The fair girl grew very pale.

"Kind Heaven help me," she murmured, clasping her hands convulsively.

"I think you will *need* help of some kind if this thing becomes known," sneered her aunt.

Laura turned and looked into her face curiously and earnestly.

"I do not understand you at all, Aunt Roxy," she said. "You have treated me very strangely of late—ever since——"

She started as some thought seemed to flash upon her, then resumed, and reading her face eagerly:

"Can it be possible that *this* is the revenge you are going to take upon me because I refused to marry William? Are you such a vindictive and unforgiving woman as that?"

Mrs. Waldron laughed mockingly at this, and Laura shuddered, glancing toward the bed in a half-frightened way, as if she feared the sound would disturb the dead. "I am of the same mind that I was then. I think you *may*

live long enough to regret that you thwarted me in the dearest hope of my life," she said heartlessly.

"Oh! Trixy, Trixy!" Laura cried, throwing herself upon her knees by the bedside, "to think that any one could believe that I would wish to harm even a hair of your dear head."

"Get up," Mrs. Waldron commanded rudely, and almost lifting her upon her feet. "I will have none of that kind of noise here, and such a display as that goes for nothing with me."

Human endurance could bear no more.

Laura turned at bay, all her proud spirit and serene face aroused to action.

"If you *know* so much, *tell* me how this thing has been done," she said authoritatively.

"Come here—I will show you," the woman returned, as taking her by the arm, she led her toward the grate. "Look there."

Laura's eyes followed the pointed finger, and saw among the ashes, and concealed by them, a small vial.

Mrs. Waldron bent down and picked it up between her thumb and finger, holding it up for her to examine more closely.

Upon the vial there was a small printed label, with the word "Poison" upon it.

Laura's face became, if possible, more ghastly than before.

Mrs. Waldron drew the cork from the vial and held it to her nose, and the sickening odor made her draw back, faint and gasping.

"Now, come here," she said again, leading her to a table which stood beside the bed, where she took up a tumbler which had a few drops of some liquid in it.

This Mrs. Waldron also held up to Laura's nostrils. The scent was the same as in the vial, although not so strong.

"That is not all," the woman continued, going to a closet and bringing forth a garment.

It was the night-robe that Trixy had worn when she died.

Laura recognized it at a glance, and when her aunt held up the front of it, and she saw that it looked as if some liquid had been spilled upon it, and that it had the same smell, her heart grew sick within her.

"Can it be that—that Trixy was poisoned?" she gasped.

"You act exceedingly well, my dear, but facts speak for themselves," sneered Mrs. Waldron, as she carefully folded the night-dress, laying it away in a drawer and putting the vial and tumbler beside it.

"But," she resumed, with a searching look at her victim's face, "if these things were carried into court, and it was known that *you* were the last person who was with your cousin, that she died in your arms, that you had previously been at enmity and that her death doubled your fortune, it would not be a very difficult matter for the jury to agree upon a verdict."

"You have said enough, Mrs. Waldron," Laura returned in a cold, hard tone, but meeting her eye unflinchingly; "and let me assure you that if I believed there had been foul play regarding Trixy no one would be more eager than I to ferret it out. If, as you say, the poor child has been murdered—though who would be such an enemy to her I cannot imagine—I will spend the last dollar of both my fortune and hers to discover the criminal."

Mrs. Waldron looked considerably alarmed at this spirited assertion.

She bent her head thoughtfully for a moment, then she said:

"You are very rash, Laura, to think any such proceeding on your part would amount to anything. Can you not perceive that all the circumstances, all the evidence, would point to you as the guilty one?"

"No, I do not see it; any one might have put that vial and tumbler in this room."

"Ah; that indeed; but where did the vial and tumbler

come from?" demanded Mrs. Waldron cunningly. "The tumbler is one that you have used for more than a year. It has a nick near the bottom, which was done one morning, I believe, by you dropping your toothbrush against it. I remember it perfectly, for I came into your room just at that moment, if you recollect, to ask you about doing some shopping for me at Stewart's. Yes, I see that you have not forgotten it. And that vial! strange that you did not recognize it! it has set on your mantel for the last two months. Do you forget how I sent Trixy one day to get a certain kind of poison to be used in the chambermaid's room? I was in your room that day also, and she brought it to me there. I put it on the shelf and forgot it. Afterward something better was recommended to me for the purpose I wished; I obtained it, and this other poison was forgotten; but every servant in the house has seen it and could instantly identify it. Do you think these facts would go for nothing?"

"But—but, Aunt Roxy——"

"Ah! you begin to realize that you are standing upon very treacherous ground, do you?" her aunt interrupted sarcastically.

"No," Laura said quietly; "for after you said you were not going to use the contents of that bottle, I threw them out, rinsed the vial, and filled it with clean water."

"You may have to prove that statement before it is believed; it is certainly *not* 'clean water' that is in it now!" was the sneering retort.

Laura's heart sank within her; she had only her own word to prove it, and she saw how this cruel chain was tightening about her.

"But, my dear," Mrs. Waldron said, adopting a more conciliatory tone, "I have no wish to see any member of my family brought to disgrace and—and perhaps we can come to some terms. I have a proposition to make to you."

"Well?" Laura said coldly, and drawing her slight form erect.

She began to have a dim perception toward what all this was tending.

Mrs. Waldron did not like either the tone or attitude, but too much was depending upon the business of that hour for her to mind them, or to hesitate long, and she said, in a low, cautious tone:

"If you will reconsider your refusal of William's proposal this dreadful thing shall pass. No one knows or suspects anything of it save myself. Everybody believes that Trixy died a natural death of heart disease, as Doctor Sutherland affirmed. So if *I* am silent, as, of course, I should wish to be rather than that my *son's wife* should be brought into any trouble, you will be perfectly safe. I do not wish the family name disgraced by being carried into court and flying over the country in newspapers in connection with a murder. It would do Trixy no good now—it would not restore her to life. It will be easy to destroy and conceal these evidences which I have shown you, and the secret will be safe with you and me. Laura, will you marry William?"

Laura stood regarding the strange woman for a full minute, a look of wonder, horror and aversion upon her white face.

She saw that she did indeed stand upon very precarious ground, as Mrs. Waldron had said; that a cunning plot had been woven around her; that she was entangled in a net which might close and narrow about her until she was crushed and destroyed. She knew that her uncle's wife was cold, hard and calculating, but she had never dreamed that she would dare to go to such a length—take such desperate and unholy measures as this to gain her point.

"Well, what do you say? I have no time to waste and let you stand there staring me out of countenance," Mrs. Waldron said impatiently.

"If you think to *drive* me into a marriage with your son, you have very much mistaken my character," Laura returned with a quietness that actually amazed her accuser.

Mrs. Waldron's eye blazed, and she shook with suppressed rage and disappointment.

"You *will* not?" she asked.

"No, I will not. Even if I loved your son I would never consent to ally myself with a member of *your* family after what has occurred to-night."

"Laura, it behooves you to be very careful how you address me," Mrs. Waldron said sternly.

"You are a wicked, unprincipled, revengeful woman," the young girl continued, unheeding her threat; "and if a crime has really been committed regarding Trixy, I believe you yourself are the guilty one. But whether you are or not, if you really believe that I have done this dreadful thing of which you accuse me, you have no right, either moral or civil, to conceal it to carry out purposes of your own."

Mrs. Waldron flushed angrily, and bit her lips until they bled. The argument was a close and cutting one, and she had not reckoned upon quite so much obstinacy.

She thought she had the game, so to speak, all in her own hands, and that Laura would be willing to agree to almost anything to save herself from the danger hanging over her.

"Are you sure *nothing* will ever change your decision?" she asked.

"Nothing. Madam, I shall *never* marry William Waldron."

"Not even to save yourself from the fate of a murderess?"

Laura shuddered and reeled dizzily at the dreadful word.

"I am no murderess," she said with white lips.

"The world will not say so—a jury will not think so when the facts are given them."

"God will see that justice is done to the innocent," and a look of faith replaced the horror that had hitherto almost convulsed the beautiful face.

"Then you must bear the consequences of your own

folly. I would have saved you; as my son's wife it would have been my *duty* to shield you. It will be a great trial for me to give expression to my suspicions, and I must confess that I do not feel equal to doing it just now, but I shall keep these evidences of your guilt, and if I can ever gain sufficient courage to do so, I suppose I shall be obliged to produce them. But," the heartless woman added, with a malicious glance, "I cannot see how *you* can take any comfort with Trixy's ~~fortune~~ after this."

"I cannot, indeed," Laura moaned; "and if that is what you wish you are welcome to it, for I could never touch so much as one penny while this horrible suspicion rests upon me;" and with one last despairing glance toward the bed she turned and groped her way back to her own room.

CHAPTER IX

"HAD HE BETRAYED HIS TRUST?"

"I DID not think the girl would hold out like this; she is too obstinate for anything," muttered Mrs. Waldron, as she closed and locked the door after Laura's exit; then going back to the bed she drew the sheet up over Trixy's still, white face once more.

"I was sure," she resumed, with a troubled brow, "that I could make her yield by holding this over her, and perhaps I may even yet if I can have patience. She may think she will defy me, but come right to the point, she or any other girl would be unwilling to have her name bandied from mouth to mouth, or to be dragged into a criminal court. I will not give it up entirely yet; she *may be* frightened into it, and it would be a pity to lose both those fortunes. Ha! I wonder how that hall door came to be open! It must have been the draught when Laura came in from her room."

This last remark was caused by seeing the door leading into the hall swing to and fro, and going to it she swung it back, looked out into the hall, then softly closed it again and returned to her lonely vigil with the dead, until morning should break.

She thought her secret was safe with herself and Laura, but there had been a listener in the hall who had overheard most of the conversation between Mrs. Waldron and her niece.

Eliot Harcourt had been immeasurably shocked when told of Trixy's death.

He had not thought of anything so dreadful occurring after the crisis had passed, and his anxiety since had been mostly on Laura's account, fearing that she would break down after her ceaseless watching and the excitement she had undergone.

But when they came to him and said his little favorite was gone, it completely unnerved him. He could neither eat nor sleep, and shutting himself into his studio, he sat there like one stunned or paralyzed all the night through.

Toward morning he thought he heard excited voices in that chamber of death, where he knew that Mrs. Waldron had been watching alone, and fearing that something was wrong, he stole noiselessly from his room across the hall, and was about to knock upon the door to offer assistance, if anything was needed, when he saw that it was ajar, and almost at the same moment he heard Mrs. Waldron accuse Laura of the willful murder of her cousin for the sake of coming into possession of her fortune.

Too horrified to remember that he was playing the part of an eavesdropper, he stood rooted to the spot and listened to all that followed.

He heard all about the vial containing poison and concealed in the ashes, and the tumbler from which it was supposed to have been administered, and of the drops that had been spilled upon Trixy's night-robe. He heard Laura's amazed and agonized denial, her despairing wail

for her lost cousin, and her final but firm rejection of Mrs. Waldron's proposal to keep silent and shield her if she would consent to marry William. He was startled, amazed, indignant at what he heard, and more than once he was upon the point of entering the room to defend the persecuted girl from her aunt's evident malice, but remembering the dead, he recoiled from anything like a scene, and remained a silent witness of all that passed within that solemn chamber.

All at once as he stood there he recalled what Trixy had told him regarding Mrs. Waldron's insisting that she was engaged to marry her second son.

"Aha!" he breathed to himself, "this begins to look very much like a plot on the part of madam to get possession of these fortunes; it has always been a bitter pill to her that that money was given to those girls. She believes in striking while the iron is hot, though Laura comes into possession of both fortunes now, and she is bound to secure them if desperate measures will accomplish her purpose. It seems that Laura has refused William," he said, the color rising in his cheek. "Poor child! I am glad I happened to overhear this for her sake."

He stole softly back into his studio as Laura passed into her room, and had only just closed the door when Mrs. Waldron's face peered anxiously into the hall.

But the young artist was very much disturbed and excited by what he had heard, and for the remainder of the night could do nothing but pace restlessly back and forth in his room, trying to think out the enigma. Trixy poisoned! and Laura, the only woman in the world who had ever stirred the great love in his heart, guilty of murder!

Impossible! the thought was one that he could not bear to entertain for a single moment.

But he readily saw that the facts to which he had listened would, if brought to light, have a very bad look, and the evidence against Laura be almost overwhelming.

He could not bring himself to believe that Trixy had been murdered, and yet, "It might not be impossible," he thought, aghast, with a sudden suspicion.

If Mrs. Waldron was capable of trying to drive a young girl like Laura by any such means into a marriage that was hateful to her, in order to gain her fortune, might she not also be capable of this dark deed? Might it not be a part of her plan, since Trixy was so nearly gone, to get her entirely out of the way, and then weaving this web around Laura, think to get possession of both fortunes at one stroke?

It seemed that she had threatened to be revenged upon Laura, and truly it looked as if she was either determined to gain her point or be terribly revenged upon the lovely girl.

"I see it all," he said moodily. "Aunt Roxy was always grasping and avaricious. It seems to me some one told me that there was a fuss of some kind when she was young, about her marrying for money; she was determined Trixy should marry Fred and Laura William; she has been bound to have the handling of Mr. Albert Waldron's money from the first. Trixy is dead, whether by fair means or foul I do not know, and now she is going to make a bold stroke for the prize."

The young artist was deeply troubled; he did not know what to do about the matter.

He longed to comfort Laura in her misery and yet dared not speak of the dreadful thing to her. He feared to go to Mrs. Waldron and tell her that he had overheard this conversation, for it might drive her to have Laura arrested at once.

"It looks very dark for her, poor girl!" he murmured, "and what a plot it is! If she is tried and convicted, and"—a shudder took the place of the dreadful word; "then, according to Mr. Waldron's will—both girls dead, *the money all falls to this family.*

The more he thought the matter over, the more excited and troubled he grew.

He knew that what he had overheard would not help Laura's cause one whit. Mrs. Waldron had been very guarded in every word she had uttered. Not an expression had dropped from her lips which could in any way be construed to implicate her in the matter. Everything pointed to Laura—the tumbler, from which to all appearances the poison had been administered, was one Laura had used for over a year. How came it in Trixy's room?

The vial was known to have poison in it; that, too, had been in Laura's possession during the last two months; how came it in Trixy's room now, and concealed in the ashes?

"Has the child really been poisoned, by accident or design, or is this merely a farce got up by that woman to frighten Laura into submission?" Eliot said gloomily. "Doctor Sutherland affirmed that she died of an affection of the heart, but it is possible he may be at fault; he feared something of the kind, and doubtless jumped to that conclusion when he found that she was dead. But I shall never rest until I know, and *what* can I do?"

The next day Mrs. Waldron, wearied out with watching, remained in her own room until late in the afternoon. Laura also secluded herself, and would admit no one to her presence, refusing both food and comfort.

In the afternoon the undertaker arrived to perform the necessary duties for the dead, for the funeral was appointed for nine o'clock the following morning, and Mrs. Waldron had given orders that everything should be arranged that day in order to save confusion the next.

When all was done they sent for her to ascertain if she approved.

They had dressed Trixy in soft, white robes, and laid her in a beautiful white velvet casket, and she looked like some lovely virgin asleep upon a couch of snow. But for her hueless lips and the marble-like rigidity of her

features it was almost impossible to believe that she could be dead.

Neither her face nor the still hands clasped upon her bosom appeared to be emaciated as one would have supposed after so severe an illness; they were almost as round and life-like as they had been in health; a faint smile wreathed her lips, and her hair had been arranged in a way to make her look very natural.

Mrs. Waldron exclaimed at once upon seeing her:

"I cannot believe that she is dead," she said, and laid her hand upon the fair forehead. "It seems absolutely wicked to put anything so life-like away into the earth."

Then turning to a servant she continued:

"Go to Mr. Harcourt's door and ask him if he will step here a moment."

Eliot appeared after a minute or two, but looking haggard and sad.

"Do you want me?" he asked in a constrained tone of his aunt.

"Yes; I wished you to see her, Eliot, you have such good taste, and tell me if you think of any improvement that can be made before the glass is put over her," she replied, while she wondered at his coldness toward her.

He stood looking down at the pale girl who had brightened many a weary hour for him with her merry wit and pleasant chat, while the great tears arose to his eyes and rolled slowly over his cheeks.

"Is she not beautiful?" Mrs. Waldron asked, weeping in sympathy.

He bowed his head in assent and wondered if she had forgotten how often she had called her a "fright" and taunted her about her personal appearance.

"How perfectly life-like she looks," continued Mrs. Waldron, as she laid one of the dusky curls a little closer to the white cheek. "I think I never saw any one before who looked so natural. Would you suggest any change in the arrangement of her robe, hair or position?"

"No, nothing could be better than to leave her just as she is," he answered, with a heavy sigh.

"Then you may as well put the glass over her at once," Mrs. Waldron said, turning to the undertaker.

"Why do you put the glass over at all?" Eliot asked quickly. "It seems dreadful to shut her in, and she would look so much more natural, or as if she were sleeping, without."

"Oh, that would not do at all; no one must touch her again, and I should not feel safe to leave her a moment without the glass," his aunt replied decidedly.

Eliot said no more, but the keenest pang that he had yet experienced pierced his heart, when the glass cover was put on, and dear little Trixy was shut away by herself into her narrow ghostly house. To-morrow the outer velvet covering would be put over all, and she would be borne away forever from their sight.

"Who will stay here to-night?" he asked, with white, pained lips, as they were about leaving the room.

"Your uncle was intending to do so, but he is laid up with a raging headache, and so I suppose I shall be obliged to, as I do not feel like asking either Fred or William, and I could not trust a servant," Mrs. Waldron said wearily.

A sudden shock ran throughout Eliot Harcourt's whole body, and a peculiar gleam shot into his eyes.

"Would you trust me?" he asked, and waited breathlessly for her answer, and without daring to look at her lest she should mistrust his motive and refuse.

"Trust you? yes, indeed. But you look almost sick yourself," she answered, remarking his haggard appearance.

But inwardly she was very much relieved by his offer, and had no notion of rejecting it.

"I am well enough, thank you; only sorrowful over this deep trouble, and I will gladly take your place to-night, if you can have confidence in me."

"Thank you—you are very good, Eliot. I believe I shall go to bed, and really rest for the first time since Trixy was taken ill. You have rolled a great burden from my heart," Mrs. Waldron replied gratefully.

She made him go down and drink tea with her, and then went to bed and slept soundly all night long, while he watched above with the dead.

Before ten o'clock every sound in that stately mansion had subsided, and every room, save that solemn chamber and the upper hall, where a single tiny jet of gas burned dimly, was shrouded in darkness, and all the weary ones, except the lonely watcher by Trixy's remains, were soundly sleeping. Even Laura, wretched and almost despairing though she was, was forced to yield to exhausted nature, and every sense was locked in profoundest slumber.

Half an hour before midnight there came a stealthy step to the door of Trixy's room upon the inside.

There was a moment of silence, then the slight click of a key as it turned the lock, the silver knob moved noiselessly, and the door was softly opened a little space.

Eliot Harcourt's face, stern, white and resolute, appeared in the aperture.

He glanced up and down the hall once or twice, stood listening intently for a moment, then came out, shut and locked the door without making a sound, put the key in his pocket, and then stole silently away to his own room.

Had he betrayed his trust?—had he deserted his post?

CHAPTER X

BORNE TO THE TOMB

THE day of Trixy Waldron's funeral dawned—cold, dismal, stormy.

The house, with its closed shutters and heavy curtains, was almost dark—a cheerless, comfortless atmosphere pervaded every room, and every face was shrouded in gloom and sadness.

At nine o'clock the few friends of the family assembled in Mrs. Waldron's parlor around that spotless casket to pay their last duties to one who, only a little more than one short week ago, had been as bright and active and vigorous as any one among them.

The services were private, consequently no great formality was observed upon the occasion.

The casket had been placed in the center of the room upon low trestles, where every eye could plainly see the slight form and pale face beneath the transparent lid.

Laura had come down alone at the appointed hour, and took a seat by herself at one end of the room, where she sat throughout the service, with her stony eyes fixed upon the pure white casket. She made no outward demonstration of grief, but her face wore a white, pinched look, as if her suffering had withered forever its bloom, and her lips were blue and drawn with pain.

Mr. and Mrs. Waldron sat side by side, the latter in finest bombazine and heaviest crape, and deeply bordered handkerchief. William and Fred occupied seats at the left of their mother.

Eliot Harcourt sat opposite Laura, and quite near the casket, but he seemed very nervous and strangely ill at ease, his glance wandering restlessly and continually from Laura to the casket and back again, while he appeared wholly unlike his usually calm, rather haughty self.

As Laura entered, he looked up quickly and searchingly at her; but she, aside from one wild, despairing glance at him, did not appear to heed his presence, nor indeed that of any one else.

The gray-haired pastor, a tender-hearted man, a friend of the family, and one who had watched the development of Mrs. Waldron's two fair charges with exceeding

interest, seemed deeply moved. Very affectionately and benignantly he spoke of the young girl, her bright, winning ways, her genial and impulsive manner, and the respectful attention with which she had always listened to his instructions. But the only gleam of real comfort that Laura gleaned from his words was his allusion to the deep affection which Trixy had always manifested for her, and his tenderly expressed trust that, though one had been taken and the other left, the broken thread of their lives would be reunited when both should meet in that "city not made with hands," and where there should be no more sorrow or pain.

The services were concluded at last and the friends were allowed one more look before the outer lid should forever shut their dear one from their sight.

Mr. and Mrs. Waldron, with their two sons, arose together and stood around her; and it would seem, from the excessive grief which Mrs. Waldron displayed, as if Trixy had been her one idol, instead of the "trial" and "fright" of her life. The others, though not so demonstrative, were not the less sincere in their sorrow.

Eliot Harcourt alone remained seated, his face pale and agitated, his eyes keen and restless, but otherwise motionless as a statue.

Laura was the last to approach the spotless casket, and now her unnatural composure seemed to forsake her.

Trembling, and with her face buried in her handkerchief, she tottered forward. She knew, or rather felt, that Mrs. Waldron was watching her every movement, and that, if ever the time came when she should charge her openly with that horrible deed, her appearance now would be dragged forward, commented upon and misconstrued against her.

Eliot Harcourt also eyed her narrowly. He had watched the others closely, particularly his aunt, as they came forward, but his whole mind and attention seemed to be con-

centrated upon the movements of this fair girl, whom he had grown to love with his whole soul.

For several moments she stood beside the casket without uncovering her face, weeping, trembling, wretched; then, with a visible effort, she removed her handkerchief and bent forward to look.

A low exclamation escaped her—a cry that attracted the attention of every one in the room, and made Eliot Harcourt half-start to his feet with an ashen face.

Was he afraid that she would betray herself? did he fear that after all she might be guilty of the deed of which she had been accused, or what was it that made him grow white, and appear so troubled and nervous?

Breathlessly he watched her while she lingered over that fair, lifeless figure, and noted how blue and pinched her lips grew, and the wild, almost frenzied look that came into her eyes.

Was the parting so exceedingly bitter? Was she seeking in that long, agonizing look to fix that loved face indelibly upon her heart?

She shook like a reed, her teeth chattering audibly, and she was obliged to put out one hand against the casket in order to keep herself from falling.

Mrs. Waldron's eyes were riveted upon her with a strangely malicious look, for she knew how this excessive agitation would tell against her, if ever her plans should ripen for action.

Eliot chancing to glance toward her, saw the look and he could bear no more.

Rising, he approached Laura, and gently took her hand to lead her away.

She started, as if from a blow, at the touch, moaned with pain, but stood rooted to the spot, staring with a sort of fascinated gaze upon Trixy's face.

"Come away, Laura," Eliot urged gently, "they are all waiting for you."

She shivered from head to foot, turned, cast one wild,

despairing look up into his face, and then with a gasp, dropped senseless at his feet.

He stooped quickly, gathered her into his arms, bore her from the room up-stairs to her own chamber, where, summoning the housekeeper, he gave her into her care, and then went back to his post below.

The casket had been covered, locked and the key given to Mrs. Waldron while he was gone, and he bowed his head with a deep-drawn sigh that was almost a groan, and which caused more than one pair of eyes to rest pityingly upon him.

It had been currently reported that the young artist had been deeply interested in the piquant little heiress, and that her death was a bitter blow to him.

The bearers now came forward, covered the casket with a velvet pall, and then bore it out into the storm and cold, the sleet beating piteously upon it and them as they went.

Then the friends followed one by one, the long line of carriages—many of them curtained and empty, and with solemn tread the funeral cortege proceeded to Greenwood, that beautiful but silent city of the dead, where the great Waldron tomb was opened, and one more was added to the number of its voiceless, pulseless occupants.

CHAPTER XI

"I WILL NEVER MARRY YOUR SON"

When the family returned from their sad errand, Laura was found to be raving with delirium, and the burden of her madness seemed to consist in a vehement denial of some act, of which no one apparently could gather the meaning.

"I did not—I did not; oh! you *know* I would not do it," she cried, almost incessantly.

"Her cousin's death has broken her down completely," Doctor Sutherland said, "and no wonder, for she neither ate nor slept during her sickness. Her constitution is not as strong as Miss Waldron's was, and I am afraid, madam, that your trials are not ended."

But Mrs. Waldron did not appear to be very deeply moved by this intelligence. She took her post by her bedside to assist the nurse, as a matter of course; but she expressed neither fear nor hope as to the result.

Once while mixing a powder for the sick girl, she suddenly stopped in the act with compressed lips and scowling brow.

"If she *would* but *die,* that would end the matter once for all," she muttered.

"Marm?" inquired the nurse, looking up.

"Nothing," Mrs. Waldron replied, with a start. "I was only repeating the doctor's directions so as to be sure I should make no mistake."

But Laura did not die.

Although so delicate in appearance, she really possessed quite a vigorous constitution, and after a long and exhausting run of fever she slowly began to mend.

But the household seemed fated to prove the old adage that

> "One woe doth tread upon another's heel,
> So fast they follow,"

for scarce was Laura pronounced to be out of danger when Mr. Waldron was stricken with the dread disease, and in less than a week "life's fitful fever was over" for him, and they bore him also to the great tomb in Greenwood.

Mrs. Waldron bore this blow, as she had borne all the rest, with wonderful calmness and self-control.

But when, a fortnight later, her husband's lawyer called upon her and told her that the merchant's business was a wreck, and that, aside from the home which had been ex-

clusively hers for years, absolute poverty stared her in the face, her stoicism all forsook her.

Swoon after swoon prostrated her. She moaned and wept and wrung her hands at this new and unforeseen calamity.

In vain William told her not to worry, that he would provide for her and that she should never want. In vain Fred made light of their changed circumstances, promising to give up all thoughts of college, obtain a situation, and speed her "chariot of fortune" again on its way.

But her proud, ambitious spirit was nearly crushed, and she would not be comforted.

She had always had a horror of poverty—to be obliged to practice economy, to plan, pinch, and contrive to make both ends meet—there was nothing worse or more to be dreaded under the sun.

To be prosperous, to be distinguished for wealth, to possess all the luxuries and elegances which riches supply had been her aim from her girlhood. She had labored for this, she had planned and contrived for it for thirty years, and this was the end of it all! Aside from the house in which she lived she was a beggar, with nothing to support the elegance and style to which she had been accustomed for so long. It was a shock that she could not calmly bear.

She knew she could sell—that her fine mansion, with its rich furnishings, would bring her a handsome sum, the interest upon which would give her a moderate support. But she could not bring her proud spirit down to contemplate any moderation of that sort; while the idea of allowing all her beautiful surroundings to go under the hammer, and of retiring to an obscure position, filled her with mortification and rage.

For a week she shut herself into her own room and nursed her anger and disappointment.

When she came forth again there were hard, set lines about her mouth and a look of resolve in her cold eyes which told that the week of seclusion had not been one of

sorrow meekly borne, nor employed in humbly seeking for resignation or fortitude to meet the trials of the future.

One day she sought Laura's room, an inflexible purpose written upon her hard face.

Miss Preston was rapidly getting well now, though her face was absolutely colorless, save for the faint line of red which had recently begun to tinge her lips, while her eyes were heart-breakingly wonderful in expression.

She had been left very much to herself of late; indeed, had scarcely seen any one since the nurse went away, save the servants who came to wait upon her. Mrs. Waldron had been concerned with other things, even if she had not utterly lacked sympathy with the unhappy girl.

William and Fred avoided her; the former because he could not forgive her for her rejection of his suit, and the latter on account of her sadness; and it seemed as if she was entirely cut off from every one.

On this day Mrs. Waldron found her bending, rapt over some flowers, lovely waxen camelias and fragrant heliotrope, touching them tenderly, almost reverently, with her white, slender fingers, and enjoying to the utmost their beauty and sweetness.

She looked very delicate and beautiful herself sitting in her crimson velvet chair, clad in a spotless wrapper which was hardly purer than her face, her golden hair wound about her head like a crown, and those lovely flowers in her lap.

Mrs. Waldron's face hardened as she saw the pretty picture; she knew that fair and sweet and gentle though she looked, as if a rude breath would have the power to destroy her—she knew, I say, that in spite of this she had no more power over her than she had over the winds of heaven.

She looked a very reed, to be swayed or bent whithersoever she would, but she knew that strongest steel was as nothing compared to the spirit which dwelt in that frail body.

"Where did you get your flowers, Laura?" she asked by way of opening a conversation and seating herself opposite the young girl.

"Eliot—Mr. Harcourt—just sent them in to me," she answered, with drooping lids, while the least bit of color tinged her cheek.

"Oh, indeed!" ejaculated her guest with a searching look into her face, her lips setting into rigid lines; "I was not aware that Eliot was possessed with such an abundance of money that he could afford to waste it upon such expensive trifles as those."

Laura did not reply to this sarcastic speech, but the tell-tale color deepened in her cheeks, a fact which Mrs. Waldron did not fail to notice, and which she thought might be an indication of some feeling that could, perhaps, explain her obstinacy regarding William's hopes.

"I have come to have a talk with you regarding the future," she said abruptly, after an awkward silence.

Laura looked up at her, her face all alive with sympathy, for she knew that the past six or eight weeks must have been very trying to her. At the same time a feeling of uneasiness filled her heart and clouded her eyes.

"Perhaps you do not know," the woman resumed, "that when your uncle died he was bankrupt and I am to-day a *beggar*——"

She was interrupted by a cry of surprise from Laura.

"Yes, a *beggar;* I do not need to choose my words, for no other will express my condition so well," she continued bitterly. "I have not a dollar in the world that I can call my own except what this house represents, not even enough to pay the insurance and taxes, which will become due in a few weeks."

"I am sorry. I did not once suspect but that Uncle William left you very comfortably situated. But, Aunt Roxy," Laura went on eagerly, her face flushing with tender, generous impulses, "do not be troubled or anxious about money matters; I shall be only too glad to help you

in any way, to relieve you from any difficulty. I trust you will feel free to rely upon me."

Mrs. Waldron regarded the girl with blazing eyes and scornfully curling lips.

"Did you imagine for one moment that I came here to sue for charity to *you?*" she asked proudly. "Thank you for your *exceedingly disinterested offer,* but I do not choose to put myself under any such obligations to you."

Laura leaned back in her chair, every particle of color gone from her face now.

"Pardon me," she said quietly, "my only desire was to relieve your mind of all anxiety."

"*Undoubtedly.* But it was not chiefly of this that I came to speak. I have something more important on my mind just now. Doubtless you have not forgotten the interview you and I had in that room," she said, with a suggestive nod toward Trixy's vacant chamber, "a few weeks ago."

Laura shuddered and her white hands clasped themselves convulsively around her bouquet.

Would she *ever be able* to forget it?

It haunted her continually, sleeping or waking.

It was that which was keeping the color from her cheeks, the light from her eyes, and the strength from her body.

"There is no use in beating about the bush," pursued the relentless woman, "and I will come to the point at once. I told you then upon what conditions I would keep silence upon some very suspicious circumstances, but you seemed to treat the subject as if I was uttering only idle words. Now I intend to settle the matter once for all, and I want it understood that I mean business. If you will marry William I will never allude to it again; of course I *could* not do anything to bring my son's wife into disgrace; we are all poor; he will be obliged to struggle on for years upon a mere pittance, when all his life he has not lacked for any good thing, unless he has good and sub-

stantial help over this rough ground. If you marry him and give him the handling of your fortune—you see I am very plain with you—everything can go on as it did before your uncle's death; there need be no change, no curtailing, no pinching, and we can all be happy once more."

"Happy!" murmured Laura mournfully, "I never expect to be happy again."

"I suppose it is natural for you to feel so under the circumstances," Mrs. Waldron began significantly, "but then——"

"How *can* you be so cruel, Aunt Roxy, as to suspect me of any treachery regarding Trixy?" passionately interrupted Laura.

"Facts speak for themselves—that vial, the tumbler, and the three hundred thousand which the accident (?) of Trixy's death gave you," was the pitiless rejoinder.

"Are you utterly merciless? Oh! I wish I could have died also; then all this bickering about money would have ceased. What could I want of Trixy's portion?" Laura demanded sternly. "I had enough of my own, more than I knew how to spend upon myself."

"It is the first time I ever heard any one advocate the notion of possessing too much money," sneered her aunt. "I do not imagine I should ever be troubled in any such way."

"Then all your bitterness toward me proceeds from the fact that I am to inherit Trixy's fortune in addition to my own," Laura said, with quivering lips. "It is indeed true that the love of money is the root of all evil. Aunt Roxy, you shall have it if you want it—take it—I freely give you every dollar, only leave me in peace, and never mention this horrible thing to me again. You and William are welcome to the three hundred thousand, and I will make it over to you legally as soon as I am able to go and see my lawyer about it."

"Thank you; it seems to me that you are uncommonly, yes, *suspiciously,* obliging in the matter. But, Laura Pres-

ton, *three hundred thousand* will not satisfy me, I am 'playing for high stakes,' " Mrs. Waldron returned craftily.

"What! do you wish my portion also? Take it—take *everything,* and I will go away somewhere where I can live quietly, and not be continually haunted by this cruel suspicion," Laura cried wildly.

"Do you think you can find such a place on earth?" was the malicious query.

"Yes, anywhere away from the sight of you," the fair girl wailed. "I never harmed Trixy—I never had even a thought of harm toward her, and you know it."

"How came that vial in the ashes—that strangely smelling liquid in the tumbler?"

"I do not know. I never saw them there until you showed them to me, Aunt Roxy. I will not remain another day in your house," Laura cried, springing to her feet with the energy of despair.

Mrs. Waldron smiled grimly.

"Sit down," she commanded. "Do you think I will allow you to go away? Do you think I will lose sight of you now? In only one way can you escape my power, and that is by doing what I have asked of you. As William's wife I will love you, care for you, shield you, and no harm shall ever come near you. No one dreams of what you and I know—no one shall ever suspect it if you obey me. If you *will* not, *I will pursue you to the end.*"

The end! What would that be? A prison cell, a gallows, a hangman's rope, and a nameless grave?

A terrible trembling seized the young girl, and she sank half-fainting back into her chair again.

"Have you no heart, no mercy?" she asked brokenly.

"Yes, all the mercy in the world, if you will do as I wish."

"And William, would he wed an unwilling bride?" Laura demanded with curling lips.

"William loves you; he would spare no effort to win

your love in return. Shall I tell him that he may hope? Will you obey me in this thing, Laura?"

"You *know* that I will not," she returned, lifting her head proudly. "Where is your honor? where your sense of truth and right?" she demanded, turning upon the woman with indignation and scorn, that you could for one moment desire your son to marry a woman whom you suspected of having committed the crime with which you charge me, and *in* which *you* would virtually become an accomplice if I should yield to your demand? And if I did that, would it not be the same as confessing to you that I am guilty? I am not. I am as innocent of any wrong as a child could be. The poison that was in that vial I threw away more than two weeks before Trixy was taken sick. I have never purchased any kind of poison since, nor put anything into that bottle but pure, clean water. My tumbler, which I used for cleaning my teeth, I missed, but supposing one of the servants had taken or broken it, I procured another, and said nothing about it. How those things came into Trixy's room I do not know; perhaps, Aunt Roxy, *you* put them there *yourself* for the very purpose of casting suspicion upon me, in order to bend me to your will."

"Did I kill your cousin?" demanded Mrs. Waldron, in low, intense tones.

"I do not believe that Trixy died a violent death," Laura answered thoughtfully; "and yet, if you are capable of doing me this deadly wrong, I do not know but what you might be capable of even *that*."

Mrs. Waldron's face was as white as the young girl's wrapper, and her eyes seemed to emit sparks of fire.

"Indeed! And what object would you impute to me, since *I* could not possibly derive any benefit from your cousin's death? You are the only one who is to reap anything from the event."

"I cannot understand you, Aunt Roxy," Laura said sadly. "One would suppose that, after having had the

care of a young girl for so many years you would naturally feel some affection for her. Instead, your hatred seems to be kindled against me, and all because I happen to have fallen heir to Uncle Albert's fortune and do not wish to marry William. If it is the money you have been plotting for I pray you cease, and save yourself further sin and useless scheming, for I will freely give you the whole. I would rather go forth into the streets a beggar than to lend myself to a plot so vile and wicked as the one you propose. If you are sincere in your belief that Trixy has been murdered you have no right to hide it; it belongs to you to produce the evidence in your possession and have the matter sifted to the very bottom. I tell you again I am innocent. The God whom I love and trust knows that I am guiltless; upon him will I rely, and I stand ready to answer to your charges before a jury whenever you will; but, madam, *I will never marry your son!*"

And Mrs. Waldron knew that she would not.

"Very well," she said in a hard, menacing tone, "if that is your ultimate decision there is no more to be said upon the subject at this time; but I warn you that you shall not escape my revenge. You can talk benevolently from now until the millennium about making over your fortune to me, but you know well enough that such a proceeding would never do; it would of itself excite suspicion. But mark me, young lady, you shall pay dearly for thwarting me in this hope, which has had the growth of many years."

She did not wait to note the effect of her words, nor for a reply, but turned quickly and left the room with a fierce, determined stride, and a brow that was overcast with anger and disappointment.

CHAPTER XII

"GOOD-BY."

LEFT alone once more, Laura gave way to a fit of nervous weeping, crying until her strength was exhausted, and then she lay back in her chair and tried to think calmly of her situation.

What should she do with this terrible shadow hanging over her, this gaunt phantom pursuing her?

Ought she to go to her lawyer and tell him all her trouble, and demand that an investigation be made in order to establish her innocence?

It was torture to her to feel that any such suspicion should rest upon her, and yet she could not endure to agitate the matter; no one in the world, she believed, dreamed of such a thing save Mrs. Waldron, and if this was only a plot to drive her into obedience, perhaps she would never dare to take any further steps in the matter; perhaps it would be better for her to wait and let things take their course. She felt as if she had not yet strength enough for it—even the thought of it was too repulsive. Besides, she could not bring herself to believe that Trixy had not died a natural death—who, in all the world, could hate her enough to wish to take her life? was the question that troubled her greatly, and she knew if a suspicion of crime went abroad, that doubtless that loved form would have to undergo a revolting investigation, the thought of which almost convulsed her with horror.

"I cannot do anything about it myself, I have no one to help me; I do not know where to begin, and it would only be like dislodging an avalanche to crush myself, if I should attempt to solve the riddle," she said wearily. "I must let matters take their course, and if she is determined to be revenged upon me in this way, I must bear it and trust to God to acquit me."

"But," she continued excitedly, "I cannot live in *this house* with *her* another day; and yet she said she would not allow me to go away; she would not lose sight of me. I shall have to run away—get off without her knowledge, and then if she proclaims this thing, that very circumstance will tell against me. I cannot help it. I will not stay here. I am innocent and I will not care what people think. And yet," she went on, her face blanching to chalk-like whiteness, "I *do* care what *Eliot* thinks; he *loved* Trixy, she may tell him this, and if he should believe it and take steps against me, it would kill me. If I but dare tell him about it myself and ask his advice—but I cannot, I never could bear to see even a shadow of doubt of me creep into his eyes. No, I will not take any steps that will serve to point at me as a criminal—better to go away quietly and never see *his* face again, than to have him grow to think me a——"

The sentence ended in a shudder, and slipping from her chair upon her knees she buried her face in the cushion and prayed wildly that God would shield her from this dreadful thing—give her light in this great darkness that she might know just what it was best for her to do.

And then her anguished, broken supplication ended with a solemn, meekly spoken "Thy will be done."

Only four short words! But could resignation or humiliation do more? Could a hero or a patriot breathe greater courage? What more could Heaven desire, or human heart offer than those humble syllables—"Thy will be done?"

The waiting angels bore it up to God, and back to the turbulent, bruised spirit came the message "Peace, be still;" and Laura Preston's heart grew quiet with an humble trust in the infinite power she had craved.

A little later there came another tap upon her door, and rising to answer it, she found Eliot Harcourt standing without.

He had not mingled much with the family of late,

although he had been very kind and attentive to Laura during her sickness, inquiring for her daily, and sending her the choicest of flowers, and also of fruits, as soon as she had been able to eat them.

He was "unusually busy," he had told Mrs. Waldron, when she had asked the reason of his excluding himself to such an extent; and he certainly looked as if hard work and a load of care besides were weighing heavily upon him. His face had grown hollow, there was a nervous restlessness in his manner and in the glance of his eyes, that plainly indicated that some deep trouble was preying upon his heart.

"May I come in for a few minutes?" he asked, with a faint smile, as Laura opened the door.

"Certainly," she answered, with a flush, and drew a chair forward for him to sit down.

"Don't," he said, reaching out his hand to stop her, "you have not strength, and I fear you are not feeling as well as usual to-day, are you?" he added, as he noticed her swollen eyes and her sad, white face.

"I have a headache to-night," she replied evasively, but he saw that it was a great effort for her to speak at all.

"Have you been out yet?"

"Yes, once or twice to ride; and I have been gaining strength rapidly of late."

He thought she looked like anything but gaining strength as he noticed how she was trembling, and the weary droop of her slender figure.

"You ought to be in the air a great deal now. I want to see the color come back to your cheeks," he returned with a fond, yet anxious glance into the colorless face.

He need not have complained, for now a vivid scarlet suffused it, but he did not appear to notice it; he was sitting as if lost in troubled thought, as if he had something to say to her, and yet did not know how to broach the subject.

"Your flowers are very beautiful; you are very kind to

remember me," Laura said to break the pause that was becoming awkward. "I am very fond of camelias and also of heliotrope. Poor Trixy was always bringing heliotrope home with her when she went out. She used to say in her droll way sometimes that there was nothing that would comfort a bruised spirit or make a wicked spirit take its flight as quickly as its delightful fragrance."

Her tone was so tender, yet so full of sorrow, as she spoke of her cousin, that Eliot Harcourt could have wept. Could this fair girl be guilty of the foul wrong of which his aunt accused her, and yet speak in this way of one whom her own hand had slain?

"No; a thousand times no," he thought, yet there must be guilt of some kind somewhere; a great wrong had been perpetrated, and some one must be guilty.

"You miss Trixy sadly, Laura," he said in gentle, sympathetic tones.

Her poor, tried spirit could not bear it; the kind voice, the kinder glance, broke her down.

"Oh, Eliot!" she cried passionately, while the tears streamed over her face and her delicate hands were clasped so fiercely that the nails grew purple with the tension, "my heart is broken!"

He longed to take her in his arms, wipe her tears and comfort her, but he dare not. He was not quite sure that he would be allowed to approach her in so familiar a way. Laura had been very reserved and proud toward him during the last few months.

"You know," she continued, feeling that she must unburden herself of some of her misery, "that Trixy was a little girl when Uncle Albert took us to live together, at least she seemed so to me. I was two years older, and two years at that age makes such a difference. I felt a care over her, and as we grew up together I loved her so. I was so proud of her bright, pert ways, her witty sayings. She was always so light-hearted and happy, and she seemed like a dear younger sister to me. I believed she loved me

as well as I loved her, until of late, a few months before she died, something seemed to estrange us. At first I could not understand it; now I can see. But the poor, dear child is *dead!* Oh, Eliot! what a dreadful word that is! and I am so wretched."

She had spoken rapidly, brokenly, and she was getting very much excited. Her cheeks were crimson, her eyes bright and glittering, and a wilk look was in them that Eliot did not like at all.

He arose and went over to her side.

"Laura," he said tenderly, as he unclasped her almost convulsed hands, and began chafing them, "do not give way to your misery so. You are not strong, and this excitement will make you ill again. I know that you loved Trixy, and that you were always kind to her."

"Do you? Oh! you do not know how it comforts me to hear you say that," she interrupted eagerly.

He regarded her very gravely, and there was a strange yearning in his look—a repressed eagerness and excitement in his own manner, as if he longed to say something, but dare not.

Once he opened his lips to speak, but caught his breath with a troubled look, then after another minute of silence, he resumed in tones that trembled:

"Do not let Trixy's d—loss prey upon you so. I cannot endure to see you so miserable and unhappy."

She searched his face with an eager, wistful look.

"I *am* very, *very* miserable," she said mournfully.

Oh! if she could but get courage to tell him—to pour all her sorrow and trial into his ears. But the thought that his face would grow cold and suspicious as he listened to the almost incontestable evidence against her, sealed her lips, and she could tell him nothing.

He watched her. He thought she wished to confide in him, and he longed to have her do so; but he could not bring himself to tell her what he knew—he would not

force her confidence. She had withdrawn her hands from his, and now sat with downcast eyes and compressed lips.

Again there was an awkward silence, and then he said:

"I came in to tell you that—I am going away for a week or two. I could not go without company to say 'good-by,' but—if—that is——"

He hesitated and grew confused.

How could he say what he wished without making her suspect that he knew what she was so anxious to hide from him?

"I mean to say," he went on, with heightened color "that if anything should happen while I am away, if you should need me, or help of any kind, telegraph me at once. Here is my address written upon this card," and he put it into her hand with a half-guilty look.

"What should happen?" she asked, in a hollow voice, a wild, startled look coming into her eyes.

Did he, too, suspect her of foul play regarding Trixy, and fear her arrest?

"Nothing, I hope," he tried to say lightly and cheerfully, "but since your uncle's death, I have seemed to feel a sort of care over you. Don't think me presuming, will you, Laura, for I, too, am very lonely, and it does me good to feel care over some one."

She heaved a sigh of relief at these words. It seemed as though he was only transferring the care he had always had over Trixy to her. He suspected nothing, as his words had seemed to indicate, and had only come to bid her good-by, and make this friendly offer.

There was keenest pain in this thought, too—he had no love for her, he could not know how her heart thrilled to every tone of his voice and how wretched this farewell would make her.

He could not feel as she did that she probably would never see him again, that when he returned he would not find her there, for she would be far away, hiding from the persecutions of Mrs. Waldron, seeking for peace and

trying to forget, if it were possible, that she had ever been accused of a horrible, sickening crime.

"You are very kind," she only said, in a sort of hopeless way.

"You will not forget—you will not lose the address?" he said quickly, not exactly liking her tone.

"I will not forget, I will not lose it," she repeated mournfully, and a little sob burst from her lips.

Something in her face made him bend nearer to her and search it eagerly, anxiously.

"Laura!" he began impulsively, "Laura—you know——"

He stopped, crushing back the wild words with all the power of his resolute will.

"I have no business, I am a beggar, I *must wait!*" were the rebellious thoughts that surged in his heart, though his very soul cried out against the stern fate that compelled him to keep silent when he would have taken this fair girl to his bosom to comfort her, and convince her that he knew she was innocent of the charge that was torturing her so.

"Well?" Laura questioned, in a low tone, as he hesitated, and he could see that she was trembling.

"You know," he resumed more calmly, "that I stand ready at any time to do your lightest bidding. Now, good-by, Laura; take care of yourself, and try to get strong and well by the time I return."

Urged by some impulse that he could not resist, he bent quickly forward and softly touched her forehead with his lips.

The crimson tide rushed to the very waves of golden hair that crowned it, and she moaned with a keen pain in her voice:

"Good-by, Eliot, good-by."

But although she said it, she still clung to his hand, while her pleading, almost despairing eyes were raised to his, as if she could not let him go. It was as if she felt

her last support slipping from her, her last friend forsaking her.

It touched him deeply.

Oh, if she had but been some poor girl!—if they could but have exchanged places—how gladly he would have gathered her into his strong arms, and with her golden head pillowed upon his breast, whispered away all her fears, and sheltered her with his love.

But his pride was like a wall of iron between them, and though his face was white and set, and his heart quivering with pain, he would not yield one jot.

"Is there anything that you want? Is there anything that I can do for you, Laura, before I go?" he asked, in a husky voice.

"No—no; but, Eliot, tell me this, you *know* that I loved Trixy; you will *always* believe that I loved Trixy?" she cried wildly, pleadingly.

"Certainly I know that you loved her—nothing shall ever make me doubt that you loved her?" he said gently.

"Thank you," Laura returned, dropping his hand with a sigh of relief, and not realizing at that moment that the very wording of his reply betrayed how much he knew regarding the matter she was striving so earnestly to conceal.

He turned away from her sadly, and with something of foreboding, while the poor, tired girl, too exhausted even to disrobe, crept away to her bed to court forgetfulness in sleep, for she had resolved that to-morrow she, too, would go away, and forever, from that place.

CHAPTER XIII

ELIOT'S DISCOVERY

After taking leave of Laura, Eliot Harcourt went out into the hall and shut the door, with a sadly troubled face.

Instead of crossing directly to his studio, he stood there undecided for several minutes, his head bent in deep thought, his face gloomy and stern.

"There must be some explanation of this matter," he muttered moodily, "but nobody can do anything without a clew of some kind."

He glanced cautiously up and down the hall, as if to make sure that no one was observing him, then he turned hastily to the door of what had been Trixy's room, softly opened it, and after one more backward glance, entered it and shut himself noiselessly within.

A sort of nervous shivering or trembling seemed to pervade him as he stood just inside the door looking about the room.

Was he thinking of the last time he was there, when he had watched beside that ghostly velvet casket, or was he oppressed by the horror of some deadly wrong—some sickening crime?

Everything in the room had been left just as it was when Trixy herself had occupied it. Nothing had been changed.

Her toilet articles remained upon the dressing-case; her work-basket, all in confusion as she had been in the habit of leaving it, stood in one corner, her favorite books hung in their little case above it, and an ivy that she had tended and twined over the window still grew and thrived, being watered by one of the servants, who had dearly loved the merry girl. Even her clothing hung in the wardrobe and the closet, which Eliot opened, as if searching for something, while upon the floor there were a pair of small slippers, old and worn, and run down at the heel, and reminding him very forcibly of the blithe, careless Trixy who had once gayly danced about the house in them.

What strange attraction or motive could have drawn him hither into this sad, deserted room?

Evidently it was some tour of investigation, seeking

for the clew of which he had muttered while in the hall; for he searched bureau-drawers, boxes and bags, and even thrust his hands into the pockets of the dresses hanging in the closet.

In the drawer of the table he had come across a little heap of ashes—those that had rattled off of the vial which Mrs. Waldron had put there that night of her interview with Laura; but both vial and tumbler had disappeared. Evidently the woman had taken them away, fearing to lose these evidences of the guilt she had charged upon the young girl.

"I don't know why I should have expected to find anything here," Eliot said to himself, as he stood leaning against the door-post of the closet, gnawing his mustache and she swept and dusted her room.

Suddenly his eye caught sight of a bag hanging on a low nail within the closet.

It had been made and put there to receive soiled clothing for the wash.

Almost mechanically he thrust his hand into it.

There was nothing in it but a large work-apron, which Trixy used to wear sometimes when a "tidy fit" was on her and she swept and duster her room.

There were two little pockets in it, and in one of these there was a handkerchief.

Eliot pulled it out, and something—a piece of paper that had apparently been folded in it—dropped to the floor.

He stooped to pick it up, and a peculiar odor greeted his nostrils, while he noticed that some little crystals were clinging to one side of it.

Turning it over, he found the word "*Poison*" written upon it.

He started and uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

How came poison folded in a handkerchief, and in one of the pockets of Trixy's apron?

It could not be that the child had been so unhappy that

she had purchased it, intending to accomplish the very end that, to all appearances, had been accomplished.

The thought made the strong man almost faint for a moment, but he would not harbor it for a second.

Trixy had been too innocent, too naturally light-hearted and forgiving, to meditate taking her own life.

He began to examine the handkerchief, looking at each corner separately.

In one there was a name—a name that made his eyes stare wildly—that made him catch his breath and his face blanch with horror.

For several minutes he stood motionless, staring blankly at those tiny letters, and then, with a shudder and a muttered threat, he carefully folded it again, wrapped that paper, with the crystals clinging to it and with the word "poison" on it, in its folds, and thrust it into an inner pocket of his coat.

Next he rolled the apron into the smallest possible compass, as he did so remarking a dull red stain upon the front of it, and concealed this also about his person, after which he stole with stealthy steps, like a person guilty of some theft, and a blanched face, from the room noiselessly crossed the hall, and disappeared within the studio.

Whose name had he found traced upon that handkerchief? What characters had the power to thus fill him with horror? What solution to the mystery that was hanging over that strangely afflicted house had he discovered in the pocket of Trixy's apron?

Was it one that would vindicate the girl he loved, or would it only tend to condemn her to a felon's cell, the gallows, and a hangman's rope?

The secret was his own, and would so remain until a power stronger and more relentless than his own will should wrest it from him.

The next morning at seven o'clock, Eliot Harcourt, looking as if he had spent a restless, sleepless night, one haunted by grinning specters and mocking phantoms,

sprang upon a westward bound train just as it was steaming out of the station, while he little realized how, when, or where he should again meet Laura Preston.

An hour later a slight figure, clad in a long drab ulster, a dark bonnet, round which was closely tied a thick brown veil, and bearing in her hand a traveling-bag, made its way with feeble, trembling steps to the ticket office in the same station, where she purchased a through ticket for Chicago.

Then she glided out, entered a Pullman car attached to a waiting train, and fifteen minutes later the lightning express steamed over the glistening rails toward the prairies and the great Western center.

At ten o'clock of the same eventful day, Mrs. Waldron rang her bell with an impatient pull, and commanded her maid to bring to her a cup of strong coffee and a plate of dry toast.

"I have a raging headache," she said, "and shall not get up at present. If Miss Preston has not had her breakfast, tell her not to wait for me."

"Miss Preston has not risen yet, ma'am," the maid answered.

Mrs. Waldron made no reply, but scowled as she remembered the interview she had had with her rebellious niece the evening before, and the maid retired to execute her command.

The breakfast that morning stood upon the table until it was cold and uneatable, and was then carried away to the kitchen.

If Miss Preston saw fit to arise and eat breakfast with her aunt, well and good; if not, the servants had been ordered not to disturb her, nor to go to her unless she rang for them, and as it was not an unusual thing for her to sleep late since her illness, her non-appearance on this particular occasion was considered nothing strange. But when Mrs. Waldron finally descended to the dining-room about lunch time, and was told that Miss Preston had

neither had her breakfast nor called any one to her, an exclamation of impatience escaped that lady.

"It will be a fine thing if we are to have her sick on our hands again," she said, and at once proceeded to Laura's room to ascertain the reason of her protracted absence.

There was no answer to her knock, so she opened the door and entered.

The bed was unmade, and the wrapper which Laura had worn the previous day hung carelessly over the back of a chair. Her slippers were upon the floor by a hassock, and a light shawl which she had been in the habit of wearing over her shoulders in passing through the halls was in a heap beside them. A pair of stockings and some skirts were thrown upon the bed.

This confusion was entirely at variance with Laura's usually orderly habits, and caused her aunt to glance around with something of surprise.

"The girl must have lain in bed unusually late, and is doubtless in the bath-room," she said to herself, and immediately proceeded thither.

But no one was there, and she returned to Laura's chamber, where she instantly made a discovery.

All the young girl's toilet articles were missing, while a number of boxes had been overturned and now lay empty upon the top of her dressing-case.

An expression of fear and anxiety flashed into Mrs. Waldron's face as she noted this, and going to her wardrobe she hastily opened it.

One glance was sufficient to show her that a dark dress, a traveling ulster, and satchel and hat were missing from their usual places.

She then went to the drawer where Laura kept her jewelry and laces. Everything of the kind was gone.

"The hussy has run away!" she exclaimed, and dropped panting into a chair.

"Fool that I was not to have foreseen this," she con-

tinued angrily. "I might have known that a girl of her character would do something desperate. I should have locked her in here after her defiance of last night, but I never dreamed that she would have strength enough to attempt anything like this now."

She hunted around for a note or something to explain this unceremonious leave-taking, but found nothing. Laura had gone without a word, and for the time at least was beyond her persecutor's power.

The thought threw the baffled woman into a furious passion.

Not only had she escaped her malice and vindictiveness, but now that she was gone all pecuniary benefit which Mrs. Waldron had hitherto reaped, and which had been no small item, would be stopped.

Mr. Albert Waldron had arranged that while the young girls remained under the guardianship of his brother, a certain sum should be paid him quarterly. This had been done regularly, and Mr. Waldron had always passed the amount over to his wife for her private expenditure, saying that since she had the bother of the girls she ought to reap whatever of benefit there might be derived from their being in the family. One-half of this sum had, of course, stopped upon Trixy's death, but this fact did not trouble Mrs. Waldron very much at the time, for she had great hopes of carrying out her scheme to gather all the money into the family.

But now she was in very straitened circumstances. Laura had flown, and with her all the income upon which, since her husband's death, she had placed no small dependence, and it was in no enviable frame of mind that she sat there and mentally anathematized her perplexing situation. She had not exactly killed the goose that laid the golden egg, but she had driven her from the nest, and now all too late regretted her indiscretion.

"I will track her the world over," she cried with fierce determination; "she shall not escape me, and this mad act

of hers will only serve to prove her guilt the more effectually. It was a sin for Albert Waldron to leave all his money to those two miserable chits. Half of it at least should have been given to my two boys. But I will not give it up even yet, unpromising as things look. I have not schemed all my life for wealth and station to be easily balked, and if Laura Preston will not listen to reason and accept the way of escape I have opened for her she *shall hang;* then who will have these six hundred thousand dollars, I wonder?"

Her face was marble white as she uttered these last words in a hoarse, excited whisper, but there was a relentless purpose in her cold, gray eyes, a cruel, vindictive look about her thin lips that boded the worst for the fair girl.

"The girl must have had money to go with. She will need money to support herself, so of course her lawyer will know where she is; I'll go and wring the secret from him," she said, after an hour spent in thought and planning for the future.

She acted upon this thought immediately, dressed herself for the street, and sought Laura's legal adviser.

He received her courteously, and she at once told him of Laura's absence and asked if she had been there to get money, or left her address for money to be sent to her.

"No," he said, "she had not been there at all;" but he had sent her a few days ago a double allowance, as she had written to him that she had some heavy expenses to defray.

Had he done anything about transferring Miss Beatrice Waldron's fortune to Miss Preston? she asked.

No; he had had no interview with her since her illness, but he supposed it would be necessary to do so as soon as practicable.

Mrs. Waldron was very much perplexed.

Laura had gone and made no provision for the future!

What would she do? How would she live?

She was a delicate girl, unaccustomed to labor or care of any kind, and here she had renounced wealth, position

and every comfort and gone out into obscurity and apparent poverty.

But this was not what troubled Mrs. Waldron the most. It was because this large fortune must lie idle, doing no one any good. She could not touch so much as a single penny of it. Nobody could unless Laura herself gave them power to do so, and here she had overreached herself, cut off her own supply and tied her own hands, as it were.

Had anything happened to Miss Preston? the lawyer asked.

"No," Mrs. Waldron explained, "but she had gone away unexpectedly that morning, probably had only gone out of town to spend the day, but it was rather unusual for her to absent herself without leaving some word regarding the matter."

She smoothed the affair over in this way, for she wanted time to think. She was not quite prepared to give her evidence to the world, but away down in her heart there was a fixed purpose to do so, if she could not carry out her schemes in any other way.

She and her sons were beggars while this frail girl was rolling in wealth that she could not use.

The thought was like a mocking demon, haunting her every step.

CHAPTER XIV

MLLE. PRETONI

A MONTH later there appeared in the Chicago papers an advertisement to this effect:

"Mademoiselle Pretoni, an accomplished musician, is prepared to make a limited number of engagements to sing at evening parties, private theatricals and entertainments, and also will receive a small number of pupils for instruction in both vocal and instrumental music at her rooms,

No. 5 —— Avenue, between the hours of nine A. M. and four P. M. Terms moderate. Apply in person or by letter."

"There, that is something new under the sun," exclaimed a Wabash Avenue belle, throwing down the morning's paper and spreading her napkin over her dainty wrapper, preparatory to eating her breakfast, which the dusky waiter in his spotless linen suit was waiting to serve.

"What is it that is so 'new under the sun?'" smilingly asked a handsome matron at the head of the table while she passed a small, flaxen-haired, rosy-cheeked miss on her right a steaming cup of chocolate.

The matron is the wealthy Mrs. Van Dorn, a widow of six years, and possessing the unlimited control of a million and a half of money. Handsome, cultured, kind of heart and a leader in society, she is a power wherever she goes and in whatever she sees fit to do.

Miss Agnes Van Dorn, the belle before referred to, is the eldest daughter, is kind-hearted like her mother, gay and impulsive, and a dear lover of pleasure; while, strange to say, she has been a star in the social firmament of the great city for three successive seasons, is twenty-two years of age, very stylish in appearance and attractive in manner.

Miss Lillian Van Dorn, the flaxen-haired, rosy-cheeked maiden on her mother's right, is now in her fourteenth year, and the pet and joy of the household.

A son, older than Miss Agnes, completes the number of the family, but he at present is away, and more of him hereafter.

Miss Van Dorn, in reply to her mother's query, picks up the paper and reads the above advertisement.

"It is the first thing of the kind that I ever saw," she said; "and if Mlle. Pretoni amounts to anything—in fact, is not a *humbug*—she will meet a want long felt."

"I do not know," returned the matron, as she somewhat languidly broke an egg into a beautiful Sevres china cup;

"when one has dancing and a good orchestra one does not care much for singing or music on the piano. Besides, how is one to know whether such a person is at all suitable to introduce among one's friends?"

"Oh, as to that matter," replied Miss Agnes, with a slight curl of her red lips, "I am not aware that anyone ever institutes inquiries regarding the private character of any musician whom one hires. Here you have hired an orchestra of half a dozen men once a fortnight all winter, and I do not believe you know anything personally of one of them."

"That is true," answered Madam Van Dorn, with a slight flush; "but it seems different. Everybody is obliged to have an orchestra where there is dancing; but the idea of having a strange woman come into your house to sing before your guests, is, to say the least, a novelty."

"Yes, and I like a change. Doubtless, Mlle. Pretoni needs to earn a living as well as those men who play in an orchestra, and perhaps we can do her a good turn and amuse our friends at the same time, by instituting a change in our entertainments. I heard Colonel Archibald say only last night that he was tired to death with these dancing parties, and he would give a good deal to sit down quietly and listen to some one who could sing well."

"Did he?" inquired Miss Agnes' lady mamma, looking interested at once.

Colonel Archibald was a favorite with her, and his attentions to her daughter of late had assumed something of significance to all who had observed them.

"Yes; and to tell the truth, I feel quite a good deal of interest regarding this 'accomplished musician.' I like the tone of her advertisement, and think I shall pay her a visit of curiosity, if nothing more," Miss Agnes declared.

"But she says nothing about references," returned Mrs. Van Dorn, with a doubtful inflection, while she glanced at the paper.

"A fig for references, mamma!" laughed her daughter.

"It was just that fact that interested me in the advertisement. She has the courage to ignore the hackneyed custom and to face the world upon her merits. I fancy I am capable of reading human nature to a certain extent, and according to my estimation half the high-toned references one gets from governesses and music-teachers are frauds. Come, what say you to driving around to Mlle. Pretoni's rooms this morning, see what manner of creature she is, hear her sing, and then, if we like her, introduce a new feature into our entertainments?"

"It can do no harm, certainly, and perhaps she will prove to be just the one to take Lilly in hand. My pet does not do as well in her music as I wish she might," Mrs. Van Dorn said, with a half-fond, half-reproachful glance at her youngest daughter.

"But, mamma, Signor Giovino is dreadful, he makes me play with dirty pennies on the backs of my hands, and raps my knuckles with his pencil," pouted Miss Lilly, with a tenderly commiserating look at the small snowflake that was conveying a spoon to her mouth.

Mrs. Van Dorn's look was not one of approval for Signor Giovino's method, but she wisely refrained from giving expression to it, and inwardly hoped that their visit to Mlle. Pretoni might be a satisfactory one.

About eleven o'clock Mrs. Van Dorn's elegant carriage and noble span of bays, with coachman and footman in livery, drew up before No. 5 —— Avenue, where the distinguished-looking matron and her handsome daughter alighted and were ushered into Mlle. Pretoni's handsome parlor.

The lady herself was not present just at that moment; she would be at liberty soon, the servant who attended them said, but a fine piano stood open at one end of the room facing toward the center. Mlle. Pretoni evidently did not enjoy having her voice bound back at her from solid walls when she sang. A few sheets of new music

were scattered upon it, while a harp, in its green baize covering, stood in one corner of the apartment.

The ladies glanced critically around while waiting for the stranger's appearance, noting with evident satisfaction the quiet elegance of everything in the room, and were particularly attracted by the exquisite taste with which a dish of rare creamy camelias and heliotrope were arranged.

Five minutes or more elapsed before an opening door announced the approach of the lady they had come to interview; then she came in carrying her visitors' cards in one delicate white hand and a roll of music in the other. She apologized gracefully for keeping them waiting, saying she had been unavoidably engaged.

Doubtless the reader has surmised that Mlle. Pretoni was none other than our runaway heroine, Laura Preston, and as she sat there perfectly self-possessed, and fluently conversing with Madam Van Dorn and her brilliant daughter, she charmed them both by her beauty and her cultured language.

During her long journey from New York to Chicago, after her flight from Mrs. Roxena Waldron's house, when she had renounced home, fortune and friends, she had revolved a dozen plans in her mind as to how she would provide for her future.

The thought of becoming a teacher in any public institution was repulsive to her; assume the usual role of runaway heroines and turn governess she would not; sew or labor with her hands she could not, and so, actuated by her own experience of fashionable society, she conceived the very original plan of which we have spoken.

She had nearly fifteen hundred dollars with her, having received, as her lawyer had told Mrs. Waldron, a double allowance only a few days previous. But this, she well knew, would soon melt away unless she invested it as capital upon which to provide for the future, which she resolved to do at once.

Upon reaching Chicago she repaired to a quiet hotel,

where she remained for a few days to rest and to look about for a desirable place in which to locate.

At length she found just what she wanted with a widow lady who owned a fine residence on ——Avenue, but who, since her husband's death, had been obliged to increase her small income by renting a portion of her house.

Laura told her what she desired, and prepossessed at once with the lovely stranger's appearance, the widow consented to give up her parlor and a small room adjoining to be used as a bedroom.

Miss Preston's next move was to go to a dealer in musical instruments, and hire the best piano and harp that she could find, after which she advertised in the leading papers as above, and then sat down patiently to await the result of her bold and novel experiment.

It *was* a bold thing for a young and inexperienced girl to do, and anyone with less reserve force and character would have been appalled at the outlay which it required, and the difficulties which would have to be encountered before she could hope to attain to any degree of success.

But Laura was conscious of her own power—she was a superior musician, both vocally and instrumentally. Her masters had often told her that, should she ever be obliged to earn her own living, a very little effort would serve to make her a *prima donna*.

Her voice was sweet and clear as a silver bell—strong and of wonderful compass, in spite of her slender body, while her intense love for music made her forget herself and her audience, and live for the time only in the song which flowed almost without an effort from her lips. This absence of all self-consciousness was one of her strong points, one of her chief charms, and made it a perfect delight to listen to her.

She had always possessed a resolute will, as we have already seen; her courage was dauntless, and difficulties only appeared to increase her zest in any undertaking.

When her rooms had been arranged to suit her, she turned her attention to her own personal appearance.

She knew that if she was to go into fashionable circles to amuse and entertain she must make the most of her natural charms, and much as it went against her inclination to lay aside her mourning for Trixy while her heart was so sore and heavy, yet she realized that her somber black would never be tolerated amid the gay throng that graced the drawing-rooms of aristocratic mansions.

So to-day as she entered her parlor to receive her almost first patrons, she was clad in a rich mauve-colored silk, the low square-necked corsage of which was filled in with soft, rare lace, and whose voluminous train, sweeping out behind her, gave her slender figure an almost regal appearance.

A small crimson moss-rose and a spray of heliotrope lay half-hidden among the laces on her bosom, the latter being worn for Trixy's sake, the former for effect.

Mrs. Van Dorn and her daughter were instantly impressed in her favor.

"If her voice is half as lovely as her face, she will take everybody by storm," was Miss Agnes' inward comment.

"But what sad, sad eyes," she added, as she met the heart-thrilling gaze that Laura bent upon her.

"We have called to make some inquiries regarding the advertisement which we saw in the *Times*," Mrs. Van Dorn began suavely; "we entertain fortnightly, and should be glad to institute a change in our usual programme; people get wearied with dancing everywhere, and what you propose will be something new. I suppose you play as well as sing," she concluded, with a glance from the piano to the harp.

"Yes, madam, and of course before deciding whether you wish to patronize me you would like to know if I am capable of entertaining your friends," Laura said, with a smile.

Mrs. Van Dorn confessed that that was a part of their errand there, and without any more words Laura quietly

took her seat at the fine-toned piano, and after lightly running her fingers over the keys, broke into a song which literally held her listeners enthralled until she had finished it.

Agnes expressed her delight in no measured terms, and her mother inwardly congratulated herself that she had consented to pay this sweet singer an early visit, and mentally resolved that she should lose no time in introducing this brilliant star—for such she felt she was sure to become—into fashionable life.

"You would make a fortune in the opera," Agnes said, after listening to a ballad accompanied by the harp.

"I have no desire for public life," Laura replied with a little quiver of her beautiful lips, and then to conceal her emotion dashed into a brilliant fantasie upon the sweet instrument, her delicate hands flying over the strings like white-winged birds.

"Have you been into society here very much?" Mrs. Van Dorn asked, anxious to know if any one had already introduced her.

"No, madam; I have been in the city only about a month, and my arrangements were not complete until this week."

"Ah, then she would, perhaps, have the very first opportunity of bringing her before the public," she thought complacently.

"What are your terms, Mademoiselle Pretoni?" she asked.

"Fifty dollars an evening, where I am depended upon to entertain principally," Laura answered, a little flush rising to her cheek, as she named this price, and wondered how it would be received.

She did not intend to be despised for underrating her own talents and the price did not appear to startle the wealthy widow.

"Can we count upon you for Thursday evening of this week?" she inquired.

Mlle. Pretoni drew some ivory tablets from her pocket and consulted them.

"I think you may," she answered. "I have no engagement for Thursday."

"Then we will expect you without fail. We will send the carriage for you at nine, if that hour will be agreeable to you."

"Thank you. I will not disappoint you," Laura said.

She had not expected this attention to be shown her.

Mrs. Van Dorn felt a trifle anxious about the costume in which she would appear. It was an experiment, and she did not wish to subject herself to a criticism of any kind; but she hesitated to speak about the matter, and finally concluded not to do so. Laura's simple though faultless toilet to-day gave her confidence to trust to her taste and a proper sense of the fitness of things for Thursday evening.

"And now about your course of instruction for pupils," Mrs. Van Dorn continued, after their arrangements and programme for Thursday evening were completed. "I have a younger daughter who seems to be losing her interest under her present instructor, and, in fact, I do not see that she is making any progress whatever. Perhaps a change might be beneficial. What are your terms for a course of lessons?"

"Sixty dollars, where I devote a whole hour to one pupil at each lesson; twenty, if I teach in classes."

She had paid eighty during the last six years, and considering herself competent to instruct she considered this sum no robbery.

Mrs. Van Dorn was paying the same eighty dollars now to one of the so-called first masters in the city, and as she had said, Miss Lillian was learning comparatively nothing.

The change would save her twenty dollars a quarter, she was charmed with Laura's style, and concluded at once to send her pet to her.

"I prefer to have a whole hour devoted to Lillian, and she shall come to you at your earliest convenience."

This matter also decided, the ladies took their leave, charmed with Laura personally, and delighted with the thought of being able to give their friends on Thursday evening a very agreeable surprise and a rare treat.

"She is perfectly delightful!" Agnes exclaimed, as they rolled away from the door. "I wonder who she can be. Her name has an Italian sound, but she is surely an American."

"She is probably some lady who has been reduced through misfortune, and takes this way to earn her living. Doubtless the name is an assumed one, as it might be unpleasant to use her own, under the circumstances," returned Mrs. Van Dorn, and coming nearer the truth than she really thought.

CHAPTER XV

DOCTOR VAN DORN

Thursday evening came, and with it, at the appointed hour, Mrs. Van Dorn's carriage to convey Mlle. Pretoni to No. ——, Wabash Avenue.

The mansion was like some enchanting spot in fairy-land, with its elegant floral decorations, while hundreds of brilliant lights poured a flood of glory over all.

Mrs. Van Dorn was all smiles and graciousness when her beautiful songstress arrived, though she waited with something of inward anxiety while Laura removed the long wrap which had effectually concealed and protected her evening costume.

The result sent a gratified flush to madam's handsome face, while Miss Agnes, who entered the dressing-room at that moment, could scarcely repress a cry of admiration, as Laura stood forth, a perfect vision of loveliness, in her creamy-white silk, very simply, yet tastefully made.

Not an ornament gleamed anywhere about her, but her snow-like neck and arms were just shaded with delicate, yet costly, lace, while low on her golden hair, which was arranged with great care, there nestled a small, full-blown water-lily, with one rich, dark, pendant bud, and a cluster of the same beautiful flowers was fastened in her belt.

"You are like a lily yourself," Agnes Van Dorn said, almost involuntarily, as she glanced over her lovely costume and then into Laura's pure face.

Laura bowed her head in graceful acknowledgment of the compliment, and then followed Mrs. Van Dorn down stairs to a little room in the rear of the drawing-rooms, where she was to wait until called upon to sing.

Here she met the young man whom she had engaged to play her accompaniments, and sat chatting pleasantly with him, until some one should come to tell her that the important moment had arrived.

She did not appear to be perturbed or agitated in the least by the ordeal before her (for it was her first appearance), and the secret of her rare self-possession lay in the fact that *she knew her own power.*

She had been in the habit of entertaining her own friends with her almost marvelous gift of song; she had more than once sung before large audiences for the benefit of the poor, and she had never failed. She had but to open her lips and the song seemed to flow from them as easily and naturally as from the throat of a bird.

Mrs. Van Dorn had whispered among her friends that she had a pleasant surprise awaiting them, and she enjoyed in no small degree their glances of admiration and wonder as Laura came quietly into the room, her slender form almost regal in the calm self-possession which marked all her movements.

In the most natural and unassuming manner she took her stand at one end of the piano, facing the sea of eager, expectant faces, and her glorious voice rolled forth, holding every one spell-bound with delight.

"What a lovely vision! What a sweet, pure profile! And oh, what a voice!" were the expressions which greeted Mrs. Van Dorn upon every side as the last tone of the first song died away, and the beautiful cantatrice modestly withdrew.

Then there followed an *encore*—enthusiastic, eager, and not to be refused.

Mlle. Pretoni returned with her eyes shining like twin stars, her cheeks like a blush rose, and the simple ballad that she rendered in her inimitable way won applause equal to that she had received for the more difficult composition which she had previously sung.

"Who is she? Where did she come from? How did you find her?"

Mrs. Van Dorn's face fairly beamed. Her venture had proved to be a signal success, and it was with no small amount of pride that she communicated Mlle. Pretoni's name and mentioned the advertisement which had led her to seek her out.

Many then remembered to have read it, but had not given it a second thought, and regretted now with some envy that the *eclat* of introducing the lovely singer had not fallen to their lot.

Laura sang several times, and was listened to with ever-increasing delight.

Then introductions poured in upon her and she soon found herself surrounded and receiving marked attention from numerous admirers.

Mrs. Van Dorn's example bade fair to be the fashion, for before the evening was over Laura had made several engagements to sing at future parties.

So her experiment became a triumph, and it was not long before applications became so numerous that she was obliged to refuse many of them, and in less than a fortnight from her first appearance in Wabash Avenue she had secured twenty pupils.

Of course, there was no more anxiety regarding how

the future was to be provided for. Money flowed into her purse with a rapidity that astonished her, and she bade fair to accumulate ere long a competence that would not compare meanly with the fortune she had renounced.

Her heart was still weary and sore over the sorrows and trials of the past, and there were many, many days when she felt as if she could not deck her body in gay attire, wreathe her lips in smiles, and go among the pleasure-seeking multitude to sing when she would rather hide herself to weep.

"Oh, Trixy, Trixy, my darling! if I could but have you back I could be happy and enjoy my triumph; but I am so alone, so unloved and forsaken," she would cry, after returning from some gay scene, and without considering that if Trixy had lived this necessity, this experience, would never have existed.

But she was not so "alone" as she imagined.

She was everywhere received with marked attention and consideration. Mrs. Van Dorn was kindness itself, treating her more like a friend than a hireling, while Agnes, the proud and aristocratic belle, at once conceived a great attachment for the lovely girl, and made frequent errands to her rooms in order to enjoy her society.

She had seen from the first that Laura was no ordinary character—that she was cultured and refined, and must have received the best of advantages from her childhood in order to be the self-possessed, highly bred lady that she was; and she often found herself wondering what complication of circumstances or misfortunes could have conspired to throw her out into the world alone, and what sorrow could have robbed her cheeks of the bloom and her eyes of the happy light that properly belonged to a girl of nineteen or twenty years.

But Laura never referred to her past, and Miss Van Dorn was too much of a lady herself to give expression to her curiosity, although she sought her upon every occasion when she could make an excuse to do so, claiming every

leisure hour, and made herself so charming that the lovely stranger grew to feel a warm affection for the warm-hearted girl.

She reminded her at times of Trixy by her ready wit, her exhaustless fund of merriment and her outspoken frankness, and this of itself drew her toward her.

One day Miss Van Dorn rushed into her room in her breezy way, with an open letter in her hand, her face all aglow, her eyes glistening with pleasure.

"Do you know, *ma chere*, that I have had a letter from Tom, and he is coming home in a few days to stay a week."

"And who is Tom? Some 'gallant, gay Lothario,' in whom you are deeply interested?" Laura asked, looking up with a smile from the book she was reading.

"Bless you, no; but my own dear brother. I thought I had told you all about him. I am as proud of him as I can be, for he boasts the title of doctor, and people say he is very cunningly skilled in the science of *Materia Medica*. He has been in New York for a whole year, where he is working up a practice, and we have not seen him once during all that time. He is perfectly devoted to his profession."

"New York!" repeated Laura with a start and a shiver, and Agnes Van Dorn knew as well as if she had been told that Mlle. Laurie Pretoni had come from New York herself.

But she replied as if she had not remarked anything singular in her manner:

"Yes, he will be here Friday, and as I know you have no engagement for that evening I want you to come and spend it with us and be introduced to Tom."

"It will be impossible, Agnes," Laura answered, with heightened color, "as I had appointed that evening to rehearse some new pieces with my accompanist."

"That is too bad," returned Miss Van Dorn, with a pout, "for I know you will like Tom, and I am determined

that you shall be introduced and get acquainted with each other before he goes back."

Be it known that the gay belle had certain secret reasons of her own for bringing about this acquaintance—in other words, she had been weaving a pretty little romance in which Laura was to figure as a future sister-in-law.

But our heroine shrank with abhorrence from meeting any one from her former home, lest she should chance to come in contact with some one who had seen and known her there, and should carry back tidings of her hiding-place.

She was unaccountably depressed now upon learning that Agnes had a brother residing there, although she had never heard the name until she came to Chicago, and did not suppose that Doctor Van Dorn knew anything about her.

She wished, with all her heart, that she could avoid this meeting, but she foresaw that it would be inevitable since Agnes was so determined upon the event.

She could not tell her, after all her exceeding kindness, that she did not wish to meet her dearly loved brother, and if she did not accept her invitation to spend the evening with them, doubtless they would meet in society before the week of his stay was over.

It must come—the ordeal could not be avoided, and the sooner it was over the better, she thought.

So, after thoughtfully considering the matter, she said:

"Well, I suppose I can postpone my rehearsal if it would give you pleasure to have me with you Friday evening."

"Now, you are a darling," Agnes cried, delighted at having gained her point; "and be sure you bring some of your prettiest songs, for Tom is passionately fond of music, and something of a judge of it as well."

"That means, I presume, that I must not fail to do myself credit?" Laura said, smiling.

"You always do that, mavourneen, wherever you are,"

returned the girl, kissing her affectionately, and then went away, eager to get home and tell her mother the joyful news.

Consequently, Friday evening found Laura a guest at Mrs. Van Dorn's, where she passed the dreaded introduction, and was soon cosily chatting with the awe-inspiring ogre whom she had so feared to meet, and who was a broad-shouldered, substantial-looking young man of perhaps twenty-six, whose kindly eye and winning manner put her at ease at once.

She sang to him several songs, and though his words were few in thanking her for the pleasure she had given him, yet she saw his appreciation and unspoken admiration shining in his eyes.

"What nice people have you met in New York, Tom—what fair women to admire?" his sister asked him, at one time during the evening.

"I have met many nice people, but very few women to admire—or rather whom I have had time to admire," he replied, with a quiet smile, although Laura, who was observing him closely, saw a slight frown cloud his brow as he said it.

"Don't tell me that," laughed Agnes, "what do you do with yourself evenings?"

"Study, read, smoke," he said dryly.

"Mercy! I thought you got through with such stupid things more than a year ago—all but the smoking. I suppose that will cling to you all your life," she cried, in mock dismay.

"I am sorry you consider reading and studying 'stupid things,'" he returned gravely, "for I shall not get through with them while I live; the more I practice the more need I find there is for such things."

And now Laura saw a look of real trouble steal over his face, as if some thought of a difficult case or of a patient in a critical condition was haunting him.

"But, Tom, you used to be a real jolly fellow! Have

you no friends, no chums? Tell me something of your life in the great city," his sister persisted.

"Yes, I have many friends," Doctor Van Dorn said, arousing himself to gratify her, "and one in particular, an artist by profession, Eliot Harcourt by name——"

A low cry interrupted him.

It came from Laura.

She had been sitting by a table carelessly turning the leaves of a book she had found there, while the brother and sister were talking, but at the mention of that name that always had the power to thrill her as none other could she experienced a terrible inward shock and involuntarily uttered that startled cry.

"What is it, dear?" Agnes asked, glancing over her shoulder at her.

Laura's face was very pale, but she recovered her composure almost immediately, and now held up the book she had been examining.

"I have torn it," she said regretfully, as she displayed a leaf torn half-way across, and which had been done by her being so startled.

"Never mind, *petite,* it is nothing so alarming that it need banish all the color from your face," Agnes replied, laughing, and then turned again to her brother. "Eliot Harcourt," she repeated, and every sensitive nerve in Laura's body tingled as she listened. "What a distinguished sounding name! What is he like? Tell me about him."

"There is not such a great deal to tell, excepting that he is a capital fellow, poor as a church-mouse, to use a hackneyed simile, proud as a king, and working like a dog to win fame and fortune."

"Poor, is he? and proud? Attributes that do not go together very comfortably. Is he handsome?"

"Eminently; you are not to get sentimentally interested in him, you know, for his heart took flight long ago," the young doctor said with a warning smile.

"Do not be troubled about my sentimental interests," she said, a vivid color rising in her cheeks, for only one short week ago Colonel Archibald had proposed and been accepted, of which event, however, she had as yet no opportunity to inform her brother. "But," she added, "who is the lady? Any one that you know? and is she poor and proud, too?"

"One question at a time, sister mine. I do not know the lady. I never even saw her, and she was an heiress."

"Ah! that accounts for the pride of your young hero! Does the lady know of his attachment?" Agnes queried, deeply interested.

"No, he could never bring himself to tell her for fear she would deem him a fortune-hunter."

"What is the lady's name?"

"Miss Preston was her name; and a very beautiful young lady, too, I am told that she was."

For a moment Laura thought her heart would burst the bounds which confined it.

Eliot Harcourt had loved *her* then, when all the time she had thought it was Trixy. He had always taken Trixy's part, he was always talking about her, he had made that beautiful bust of her and she had believed that his coldness toward her had originated because he, too, thought, as Mrs. Waldron had tried to make her cousin think, that she did not like her.

He had been kinder to her since Trixy's death, and she had thought it was because he had seen her suffering and anxiety, and had come to believe that she did really love her after all.

But it was not Trixy at all whom he had loved, but her own self, and he was too proud in his poverty to make a sign; he was afraid he would be thought a "fortune-hunter" if he tried to win her before he won fame for himself, and this accounted for his reserve and coldness to her.

How could he misjudge her so, when she loved the very sound of his name, when even the little tap, tap of his

mallet upon his chisel, as she used to hear it when sitting in her room, had power to make her heart thrill, and the color burn in her cheek?

Sitting there and listening to the startling announcement from Doctor Van Dorn, she grew hot and cold by turns, a keen electric pain, that was not all pain either, running throughout her nerves.

And yet she dare not move for fear of attracting attention to herself, and having her secret and identity discovered. If she could but have got away by herself.

"What makes you say 'was?' Why use the past tense?" Agnes Van Dorn asked of her brother.

"Because all this seems to be a thing of the past," he answered sadly.

"How so?"

"It is quite a story, and a mournful one, too, but as you seem to be so deeply interested in it, I will tell you something of it, at least, what the world knows of it."

"There were, a few months ago, two cousins residing in New York. They were heiresses, made such by the will of an uncle, who also made the proviso that if one died without heirs the fortune of that one should revert to the other. The youngest one, a Miss Waldron, died very suddenly during the early part of the winter, and consequently her fortune became the property of her cousin, the one Harcourt is fond of.

"She was untiring in her devotion to her cousin during her sickness, and was so worn out that she, too, had a long and alarming illness, but after she began to recover, and while Harcourt was absent upon business, she very mysteriously disappeared, and nothing has been heard of her since.

"Then it came out, through Mrs. Waldron, who has had the care of the cousins for several years, that there were some strange circumstances attending the younger one's death. She was supposed to be doing very well, and

on the road to recovery, until one day, when no one was with her but her cousin, she died very suddenly.

"The physician pronounced it heart-disease, but Mrs. Waldron has since affirmed that she found a bottle containing poison buried in the ashes under the grate, and a tumbler on the table containing a few drops of the same liquid. She says that she was so horror-struck upon making this discovery, and so appalled by the thought of what would result if such an exposure was made, that upon the impulse of the moment she concealed the evidences of guilt. But the secret was such a burden that after Miss Preston's flight circumstances seemed to point so strongly to her as the author of the deed, that she could keep it no longer.

"The general opinion prevails that she did it to secure the fortune of her cousin, since Mrs. Waldron says that there was a fierce jealousy and a good deal of unpleasantness between them."

"Does Mr. Harcourt believe her guilty?" Agnes asked eagerly.

"Oh no. He has always firmly believed her innocent."

"But if she fled what became of the fortune? How could it do her any good if she went away and left it?"

"It could not, of course, and there it remains in the charge of her lawyer; but public opinion affirms that she knew of Mrs. Waldron's discovery, and fearing arrest, ran away. The very fact of her flight seems to confirm the suspicion of her guilt. The matter is now in the hands of the authorities, and detectives are searching everywhere for her. Poor Harcourt has been nearly beside himself over her disappearance and the action his aunt has taken against the girl, and though he has no fear but that her innocence will be proved, yet it is all very trying—hah, Agnes! your friend——"

Doctor Van Dorn started suddenly to his feet as he uttered these last words, and sprang forward just as poor Laura, unable to bear any longer the torture to which she

had been subjected, slipped without a sound from her chair, and lay in a dead faint upon the floor.

CHAPTER XVI

A NIGHT OF HORROR

Dr. Van Dorn lifted her in his arms and laid her upon a sofa, while Agnes hastily rang for assistance, and then went to the side of her friend, looking frightened and very anxious.

"Poor child! She has looked pale all the evening; she could not have been well, and I fear she is working too hard," she said, bending over her head and chafing one of her limp, white hands.

But Laura did not long remain unconscious; under the skillful treatment of the young physician she soon revived, and then tried to make light of her illness.

She had, however, suffered very keenly while listening to the rehearsal of all her sorrow and trial, while the knowledge that her aunt was putting her threat into execution, determined that if she would not yield to her will she should suffer the extreme penalty of the law, was a shock which her sore heart could not bear unmoved.

She tried to sit perfectly quiet, so as not to call attention to her face, which she knew must be ghastly. But it was all too dreadful. She had been publicly accused of willful murder; the detectives were even now searching for her and would find her—they would be sure to find her; she would be arrested and arraigned before a public tribunal; her name would be in every paper, in every mouth, and with the evidence which Mrs. Waldron would produce, and the fact of her running away, she had every reason to fear the worst. How could she bear it and live?

She grew dizzy and weak; she would have been glad

to rise and leave the room, but she could not move. She seemed frozen to the spot and gradually her senses slipped away from her, the lights danced about her eyes and then grew dim, her hold upon that velvet-bound book relaxed, and then everything became a blank and she fell from her chair and lay like a broken and crushed flower upon the carpet.

"You are better, dear?" Agnes Van Dorn said, when after a long-drawn sigh she opened her eyes and looked up wonderingly into the faces bending over her.

"Yes. What has happened?" she asked faintly, too confused even yet to remember what she had suffered.

"Nothing but a little fainting turn, and you will be all right before long, I trust," the young doctor said gently.

His voice seemed to bring her more to herself, and a thrill ran through every nerve as she wondered if he mistrusted that she was the one of whom he had been speaking.

She turned her head and looked at him, studying his face.

It was a good, true, noble face, and only kindly interest and sympathy gleamed from it. There was no look of suspicion in his mild eye, no mistrust in his tone, as he raised her head with one strong hand, and told her to drink the wine that he held to her lips with the other.

"Now, *mon ami,* I am going to have Tom assist you up-stairs, and then *I* am going to put you cosily to bed," Agnes said, in her cheery, breezy voice, as Laura attempted to sit up, but was obliged to lean weakly back again.

"Oh, no; I shall be better soon. I must go home," she said.

"But you are not fit to return to-night, and I shall nurse you so tenderly that you will be all right in the morning," her friend persisted.

"No; I cannot stay; I am perfectly able to go, and I shall be better at home, and by myself," Laura returned,

and no one knew how she longed to be at home, with her tortured heart, away from every eye, and where she would have no fear of betraying the secret which was wearing upon her so.

"You foolish child! Do you think I will let you go? If mamma had not been called out I should appeal to her authority to keep you. But you shall be my guest for to-night at least. Tom, tell her that she must stay," Agnes said, appealing to her brother.

"I think it would be wiser for mademoiselle not to go out into the night air after fainting," he said gravely.

But it was of no use to argue the point. Laura was determined to return to —— Avenue, and as the young physician saw that she was becoming excited by their opposition, he did not press the matter further.

So the carriage was ordered. Laura was well wrapped by the anxious and attentive Agnes, and Doctor Van Dorn accompanied her home, assisting her to the door of her room, where, bidding her good-night, after putting a little vial of something into her hand—something to be taken before retiring—he returned to Wabash Avenue very much interested in his sister's beautiful and accomplished friend, but without a suspicion of who she really was.

Laura passed a sleepless night in spite of the doctor's potion, and looked worn and haggard when morning came.

She had spent those wakeful hours in trying to decide what was best for her to do.

She carefully reviewed every detail of the last few months, and knew that circumstances were terribly against her, and had been from the first.

The apparent coldness that had existed between Trixy and herself; the fact that she had been alone with her at the time of her death, and when every one thought her to be doing so well; that poison-scented tumbler upon the table by the bedside; that vial among the ashes, and lastly her flight, after a stormy interview with Mrs. Waldron, during which she had accused her of the crime—all

formed such a chain of evidence against her that she saw no possible way of escape.

She could tell the story of William Waldron's proposal and her refusal, though her cheeks burned hotly at the very thought of it; she could tell of his mother's anger and her threat of revenge; she could repeat that conversation in Trixy's room, which she believed no one knew of save themselves, and she could say that her flight had been occasioned by the persecution of Mrs. Waldron, but who would believe her when she had nothing save her own word by which to prove it?

The story of persecution and threatened revenge would, in all probability, be scoffed at, for it was well known throughout the circle in which they had always mingled that both Trixy and she had had a home with their uncle's wife for years, and to all appearances had been well and kindly cared for, while Mrs. Waldron, although a proud and haughty woman, had always sustained an unblemished character.

Things certainly looked very dark, and the evidence was all against her. It was truly a dreary prospect, and the poor girl, as she lay there the long night through, thinking—thinking—her head throbbing, her heart almost breaking, wished that she could drop into oblivion and end the struggle at once and forever.

She had no hope that she would escape the fiery ordeal of a trial, she felt sure that the time could not be far distant when she would be arrested and tried for the horrible crime of murder, and it might end in *conviction.*

She closed her eyes, shuddering at the thought, every sensitive nerve in her body quivering with agony.

Over and over again the terrible scene came up before her. In imagination she saw herself in a crowded courtroom, surrounded by a sea of cruel, curious faces; she saw the stern countenances of the jury as they rendered their verdict, "guilty," and it rang in her ears like the clanging of a thousand bells. She heard the inflexible voice of the

judge as he pronounced the dread sentence of death; then that ghastly instrument, the scaffold, with its dangling rope, its trap, and the executioner waiting to do his work, rose up before her with a vividness and reality that threatened to undermine her intellect.

It was a night of horror to the lonely, fragile girl, and it was no wonder that she was white and haggard when the morning began to break.

"What shall I do?" she moaned, throwing herself exhausted upon her bed, after walking the room until her weary limbs refused to perform their office.

"Shall I fly from this place and try to hide myself in some lonely, desolate spot, or shall I await the issue here, go quietly on my way and trust to my Father's care?

"It can do me no good, no permanent good, to change from place to place," she mused. "It is useless to think I can utterly escape from those merciless detectives when once they give chase; they are like trained blood-hounds, hungry and thirsty for their prey, as inch by inch they slowly, but patiently and surely track their victim."

For a long time she lay there balancing the question, "Shall I go, or shall I stay?" then at last she arose, with a look of resolution on her wan face.

"I will remain calmly at my post," she said, in low, firm tones. "I will not increase the appearance of guilt by seeking to hide myself. If worse comes to worst, I will meet it bravely like an innocent woman. I will tell my story fearlessly, *every item of it;* I will use every effort to preserve myself from disgrace and an ignominious death, and leave the rest to One who knoweth the end and can give me help in the hour of my dire necessity."

For Laura Preston once to resolve was to *do.*

She at once began to put her faith to practice.

She arose and removed the rich dress which she had worn at her friend's the evening previous, bathed her face with fresh cold water, arranged her hair with her accustomed nicety, and then put on a dainty wrapper of white

cashmere, with facings of pale pink silk, and was ready to take up the duties of the day.

She was very charming when her toilet was completed; the delicate color of the facings to her wrapper lent a faint tint to her pure face that was like marble with the glow of life in it.

Her eyes were still sad, but not hopeless—oh, no; there was a clear, steady gleam in their azure depths, which told that the faith, the trust of which she had spoken, was not a myth, a mere form, to prate about for a moment and then forget; it was, instead, a firm, tangible hope, a trust that uplifted her soul, that quieted her heart-throbs of terror, that said "peace, weary one, be still," that gave her strength and calmness to greet her pupils with her accustomed smile, and listen to their dull exercises with her usual patience and sweetness.

When Agnes Van Dorn and her brother called to inquire how she had passed the night, there was not a trace of the keen agony which she had endured through those long hours visible, except, perhaps, in the almost imperceptible curve of grief about her lovely mouth, and in the drooping of her white lids.

"My fair priestess, how do you find yourself this morning?" Agnes asked, with a fond, admiring glance into her beautiful face and over her graceful figure.

"As you see me—in my usual health, I trust," she answered, striving to speak lightly, as she turned to salute Doctor Van Dorn.

But his practiced eye saw traces of the storm which had passed, that his sister did not notice, in the slight quiver of her sensitive lips, the uneven throbbing of her temples, and the trembling of her hands. But even he did not dream of the cause of all this; he set it down to the slight illness which she had had the previous evening, and only thought how almost divinely fair she was to look upon.

"We have come to take you for a drive, *ma chere;* the

day is charming, and I know you need a breath of fresh air," Agnes returned.

For an instant Laura shrank at the suggestion. Some dreadful detective might even then be in the city searching for her, was the thought which flashed through her brain.

Then she chided herself for being so foolish, since, if she had not heard Doctor Van Dorn's story of the previous evening, no such fear would have alarmed her, and she would not have hesitated for an instant.

Therefore, she answered frankly:

"Thank you. You happen to come very opportunely, for I have an hour to myself now, and I will go with pleasure."

She excused herself for a few minutes, and retired to make some change in her dress; but soon reappeared in a dark, beautifully fitting carriage-robe, while her tasteful hat, with its delicate blue feathers, and a cluster of white violets, was exceedingly becoming to her.

"Agnes," whispered the young physician, as he helped his sister into the carriage and then waited for Laura, who stood in the door-way for an instant to fasten her gloves, "I think your friend is the most purely beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"I am delighted to hear you say so, Tom. Perhaps your admiration may ripen into something warmer one of these days," she answered with a brilliant smile, but with a quick, earnest glance into his face.

He shook his head and frowned slightly, while that same troubled look that Laura had noticed the evening before settled over his countenance.

"What may that very wise gesture mean?" laughed Miss Agnes. "Is there after all some charming damsel over yonder, who has been making havoc with your heart?"

Doctor Van Dorn colored and said laughingly, as he turned to assist Laura into the carriage:

"My sister is pelting me with very unfair questions.

You shall be referee and tell me whether I must answer them or not," and he seated himself beside her, carefully arranging the robe about her.

"I'm only trying to find out who is to be my sister-in-law," Agnes said, with a pretended pout. "One naturally feels some curiosity upon so vital a question."

"There will be time enough for that when there is any prospect of an addition to the family," her brother answered with a constrained laugh.

Laura noticed the embarrassment in his tone, and instantly surmised that there *was* some fair lady in whom he was deeply interested, and strange to say, she found herself wondering what the woman whom he would marry would be like.

But the subject was changed, and the spirited bays dashed away toward Lincoln Park and the glistening lake.

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. WALDRON'S HARANGUE

ELIOT HARCOURT was absent from the city for several weeks.

He had been called South upon particular and perplexing business, and which detained him much longer than he had at first expected.

He had received no news during all that time regarding his aunt's family or the incidents that had transpired, and was, therefore, greatly shocked upon returning to find Laura had left home upon the very day that he had started on his journey.

"What possible motive could she have had for taking such a step?" he inquired, with a keen searching of Mrs. Waldron's face, when she told him of the circumstance.

That lady drooped her eyes with a sad expression and sighed heavily.

"I am afraid it is but too evident what her motive was," she answered sorrowfully.

"It must have been something of a very trying nature to drive her to such a step," he returned dryly.

Too well he surmised what explanation the woman at his side would give him.

"It is surely very trying to me," Mrs. Waldron sighed, putting her deeply bordered handkerchief to her eyes to wipe away a simulated tear, "and I am sure I do not know how I am to bear it with all my other troubles. Trixy's death was enough to upset me entirely in the first place, and when my husband followed so suddenly I was nearly paralyzed. Then came the knowledge that he was bankrupt and I doomed to a future of poverty, but this terrible thing about Laura far outweighs everything else."

Eliot was becoming impatient of this long harangue, but he controlled himself, and she resumed, with an injured air:

"Here I have the same as brought those girls up; they have been with me, you know, for years, and my hopes in a great measure were centered in them"—Eliot thought she was speaking more of truth than she realized just now—"almost as much so as in my own children; but one is dead and the other a—oh, Eliot how can I tell you? It is too horrible."

"Please do not keep me in suspense," he said, with white lips.

He knew well enough what she was going to tell him, but he was terribly excited nevertheless.

"I used to think you were very fond of Trixy," began Mrs. Waldron, unheeding his request, and carefully feeling her way along.

"I *was* fond of Trixy; she was a dear, lovable child, and—but what is this about Laura? Why do you not tell me?" and his eyes seemed glued to her face.

"I am going to," she said, shifting her own glance uneasily. "But—could you bear to know that Trixy was—*murdered?* and her voice dropped to a frightened whisper at the word.

"Murdered!" he mechanically repeated.

"Yes, murdered—poisoned," Mrs. Waldron returned, gaining confidence now that her secret was revealed, for she had gone too far to retreat, and the battle must be fought out to the end.

"No," he answered gravely, and with an inflection which she long afterward remembered as having sounded strangely to her, "I do not think I could bear to know it, and it cannot be possible that you intend to proclaim any such thing."

"But I do; I must, for I have every reason to believe that such was the case."

"But Doctor Sutherland said Trixy died of heart-disease."

"I know that he did, but he made no very critical examination. He knew that her heart was affected, and that there was danger of her dropping off in that way, although he told no one but the nurse of it at the time, hoping that as she became stronger she would outgrow it. So, of course, he called it heart-disease; but I *know,* and can *prove,* that she was *poisoned!"* Mrs. Waldron said impressively.

"*How* do you know it?" and Eliot Harcourt's eyes were raised somewhat defiantly to hers.

He had resolved to stand between this cruel woman and Laura and fight valiantly for her if need be.

"Because I found a bottle labeled and containing poison hid in the ashes under the grate in Trixy's room——"

"That proves nothing," interrupted the young man impatiently.

"Wait until I tell you all. I also found upon the table by Trixy's bedside a *tumbler* containing a few drops of the same liquid that was in the vial. Some of it had been

spilled upon Trixy's night-dress, too. Do not these circumstances point to a dark deed?" she asked, with a note of triumph in her voice.

"Perhaps. And whom do you suspect was guilty of this crime?" he asked with averted glance, and in that peculiar tone he had used once before.

She leaned toward him, laying her hand on his arm, and an inward shudder pervaded him at the touch, though he made no outward sign.

"*Who was likely to profit mostly by Trixy's death?*" she whispered significantly.

"Do I understand that you mean to accuse Laura of such a deed?" he demanded sternly, and shaking her hand almost rudely from his arm.

"I am afraid that I must do so," she asserted with a pretended sob. "I fear that I have concealed this evidence too long already for my own good. Unpleasant questions are continually being asked and hints thrown out regarding Laura's sudden and mysterious disappearance.

"Did Laura know that you suspected her of this before she went away?" Eliot questioned to see what she would say.

"Yes; and that is probably why she went away as she did; and, by the way, it was the very worst thing that she could do. I told her that I had found the vial and tumbler, and they are things which had been in her possession for a long time previous. But, of course, she denied all knowledge of anything wrong, though I told her if she would confide in me and be guided by me I would do all I could to shield and assist her."

Eliot felt as if he could almost strangle the hypocritical woman as she sat there with her sanctimonious face and poured this horrible story into his ears; for, having overheard that conversation between her and Laura, he knew well enough upon what terms she had promised to shield and assist the persecuted girl.

"Have you mentioned your suspicions regarding the

manner of Trixy's death to Doctor Sutherland?" Eliot asked.

"No, I have told no one but you, Eliot—not even William or Fred. I—I thought you would be anxious to assist me in ferreting out this thing, since you were so *very* fond of Trixy, and took her death so much to heart," and Mrs. Waldron searched his face somewhat anxiously.

Eliot flushed.

She believed, then, that he had *loved* Trixy, and that was why, probably, she had forbidden her to go to his studio. She should be undeceived at once.

"I did love Trixy," he answered with grave frankness, "but not in the way you imply, if I understand you correctly. I had *never* any intention of asking her to become my wife."

"Then I have been mistaken," she returned thoughtfully, "for I really thought it might come to that, and I was quite sure that Trixy loved you."

"Not in that way, I assure you," Eliot answered decidedly.

"About this—this other matter, Eliot, will you give me your advice upon it?" Mrs. Waldron asked after a moment's pause.

"Certainly, if my counsels will be of any use to you," he said rather coldly.

"Things have reached such a crisis that I feel obliged to give my evidence into the hands of the authorities," Mrs. Waldron remarked, with a furtive glance at him.

"How have they reached a crisis? You say no one suspects or knows anything of this matter but yourself and Laura; you are not *sure* that your surmises are true. Why not let the matter rest until there are further developments?"

"I told you that I feared I had waited too long already, and my conscience will not allow me to keep the secret any longer."

"Oh, if *conscience* troubles you, I would certainly coun-

sel you to heed all its admonitions," Eliot said with a covert sneer, adding, "but at the same time *I* should advise you to do nothing further about this affair."

"Why not?" she demanded quickly, and with a frown.

"Because I do not believe that Laura Preston is guilty of what you accuse her," he replied, very slowly and distinctly.

"You do not believe it!" she cried, apparently astonished. "Is not the evidence almost incontestable against her? Think a moment of all I have told you—it's as clear as the day."

"It might appear so to a prejudiced person, or to one who did not *know* Laura for the pure-minded, high-principled girl that she is. To me it is no evidence at all," he said, with a decision which plainly told her she could hope for no ally in him.

"What did she run away for then? Why does she hide herself?" she asked, with a flush of anger rising to her cheek.

"That I am unprepared to say; but Laura always had a good reason for every step she took."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Waldron retorted with some asperity; "perhaps your admiration was directed toward Laura rather than Trixy, as I had supposed."

"That is as it may be," he quietly returned; "but I repeat, I would advise you to take no legal steps in this matter."

"I cannot feel that it will be right to conceal what I know; why! *I* might be considered an *accomplice* if this should be discovered without any action on my part."

"Possibly," Eliot said coldly.

Mrs. Waldron moved uneasily in her chair and her face grew dark.

She did not like the way in which her confidences had been received, and she began to regret that she had told him anything concerning her intentions.

"I hoped for your assistance and counsel in this, since

you always professed so much friendship for Trixy," she said, in rather a crestfallen tone.

"The latter I have already given you; the former I shall feel obliged to render Miss Preston, if you are determined to proceed against her;" and if she could have known the help that he would be able to give to Laura, she might well have feared for the result of her cause.

As it was she flushed angrily.

"Just as you choose. I shall, however, give my evidence into the hands of the authorities immediately, and let them take such steps as they may deem best. You cannot expect that I am going to conceal a crime like that; one committed almost under my eyes, and run the risk of being arraigned for it myself," she said hotly.

Eliot regarded her earnestly for a moment.

Could it be possible that she really believed Trixy to have been murdered, and Laura to be the guilty one?

She seemed so in earnest, so apparently innocent, and received with such an injured air all his assertions of belief in Laura's integrity, that he was half-tempted—or would have been, if he had not overheard her persecution and disgraceful proposals to Miss Preston on that memorable night—to think her sincere in pursuing the course she contemplated.

"If you really believe Trixy was foully dealt with there is something of a risk in concealing your evidence, I admit," he answered, with a steady look into her eyes.

"If I really believe!" she repeated in astonishment, while her glance did not waver; "what else could that poison have been there for?"

"I am unable to say," he answered with a sigh, considerably mystified about a number of things.

"And you would advise me to do nothing!"

"Yes—or I would not be too hasty, I think if you wait everything will explain itself in time."

"How can the presence of that poison be explained in any other way? Of course it was never put in Trixy's

room and concealed in those ashes unless some evil was intended."

"No; I do not think it was," he answered significantly. "But I do not believe that *Laura Preston* put it there."

"Who then?" she demanded, with some excitement and a slight start, which he did not fail to notice.

"That I am not able to affirm just at present; but I feel confident, nay, I am sure the truth will appear some time, and it will not be to condemn Laura, either."

For a moment he appeared as if he would like to add something more, but he remained silent, and Mrs. Waldron seemed very ill at ease.

At last Eliot resumed, with a very troubled face:

"Do you realize *all* that this involves? have you thought that the authorities will demand an examination of Trixy's body to be made? are you prepared for anything so terrible as that?"

His companion shuddered.

"Yes," she said, and her face was white even to ghastliness. "I know that such will probably be the result of the exposure, but I dare not defer it any longer—that vial —that tumbler haunt me continually."

Eliot Harcourt also shuddered, as if he, too, was haunted by something unpleasant.

"You are determined then?" he said, lifting his eyes with a glance half-pleading, half-threatening.

"Yes, fully," she answered, in a firm tone, though she hesitated a trifle between the words.

"Aunt Roxy, *don't* do it."

It was very seldom that he addressed her thus, and she gazed at him with something of surprise, for there was an almost agonized tone of entreaty in his voice.

"I must," she returned, with compressed lips.

"Wait a little while—a month longer, and then I promise to render you all the assistance in my power," he said excitedly.

"Why not now as well?" she asked, in surprise.

"Because," he began, with averted eyes and speaking with some nervousness, "I *cannot*—there are some things that—that I cannot neglect for anything just now."

"Then I shall be obliged to do without you, and perhaps it will be just as well in the end. I might implicate you also," she returned, with bitterness.

"Very well," he said, lifting his head haughtily, "do as you will. I have advised you, *now I warn you* not to do as you propose, for I shall bend every nerve to vindicate Laura, and Mrs. Waldron I believe I shall succeed."

There was a strange flash in his eyes as he said it—a flash that made her nerves prickle as if from a shock of electricity.

Then a light seemed to break upon her mind.

"*You love Laura!* I *know* you do, and that is why you are so anxious that I should not proceed against her."

"And if I do, what then?" he asked proudly.

"Aha! I am right then; and *you* want that six hundred thousand, I suppose," she said, almost savagely.

The young artist's lips curled with infinite scorn.

"It is *because* of that six hundred thousand that I have never told her how I love her," he said excitedly, and then continued with a sternness that awed the woman by his side.

"Yes, I do love Laura, as you have surmised. I have loved her almost ever since I came here to your house, and became acquainted with her, but I shall never tell her of it—never ask her to be my wife until I have won my way to a position that any true woman would be willing and proud to occupy."

"She will be *doomed* before that times comes," Mrs. Waldron whispered, the veins upon her forehead swelling out hard and tense with rage at this noble confession to which she had just listened.

And now she began to believe that this was the secret of Laura's obstinacy regarding William.

If Eliot loved her he must have shown it in some way,

and Laura becoming conscious of it, had learned to reciprocate it.

It was not a pleasant thought in connection with the failure of her scheme that she had been nourishing for so many years.

"I do not think she will be doomed to anything very terrible," he quietly replied, "and, Aunt Roxy, I want you to remember in the future, if things do not turn out *just as you expect they will,* that I gave you fair warning. Now, if you have nothing more that you wish to say to me I will retire."

He arose as he spoke and waited a moment for some reply, but Mrs. Waldron, now thoroughly aroused to antagonism, preserved a sullen silence, and Eliot, with a slight inclination of his head, quietly left the room.

"What does he mean by 'things not going just as I expect they will,' I wonder?" she muttered to herself after the door closed upon him. "I might have known better than to let him into my house with those two girls. I suppose it serves me right though for my folly; but I've put my shoulder to the wheel now, and I will not turn back. Everything points to Laura as the guilty one, and I will make her rue the day that she defied me. Here I am a comparative beggar, and that fortune, a part of which at least should have come to my children, lying utterly idle and useless, of no benefit to any one. It is enough to make me go raving distracted, and I vow that I will have the handling of it yet. It shall not go out of this family if there is any way to prevent it. I believe the game is all in my own hands, and I cannot fail to succeed. If everything should go right for me—they would not, of course, think of hanging her"—her face grew terribly gray at this thought, "a young girl—they would probably imprison her for life; she could be made comfortable as long as she should live, and yet she would be just the same as dead to the world; she *would* die after awhile and the fortune would then come to William and Fred."

She sat considering the *pros* and *cons* of this point for a long time, then, with a determined face, arose, clad herself for the street, went to see a lawyer, and delivered up her *secret,* and the cruel war against our fair Laura was begun.

CHAPTER XVIII

A PAINFUL SITUATION

Mrs. Waldron's story of the supposed murder of Trixy, together with the attending circumstances and the evidence against Laura, created a great commotion in the minds of the public at large.

Crime in high life always produces excessive excitement, not because the sin itself is greater than hundreds of evils that are committed every day in the poorer walks of life, but because of the jealousy that exists on account of the proud position and superior advantages which the supposed criminal has heretofore enjoyed, and which makes the less fortunate vindictive and savage to hurl them into degradation and trample out their spite upon them, giving vent to the malice and venom of their corrupted natures in this most pitiable manner.

Thus it was with Laura, and those of her own sex were the most malicious of all in their denunciations.

The evidence against her appeared so strong and conclusive that not much doubt was entertained in the minds of the authorities as to her guilt, and detectives were at once sent forth in every direction to search for the suspected girl.

Doctor Sutherland, the physician who had attended Trixy, maintained that no wrong had been done. He was willing to swear that the girl had died a natural death, and that Miss Preston's anxiety for and care of her cousin, together with her excessive grief at her death, were sin-

cere and heartfelt, and his indignation against Mrs. Waldron for the course she was pursuing was very bitter.

Orders were issued by the authorities to have the body of the young girl removed from the Waldron tomb and subjected to a critical examination, to ascertain whether she had died a natural death or not.

But when this was attempted it was discovered that the key to the vault was missing.

This seemed like another suspicious fact against Laura, and it was at once assumed that she had stolen and taken the key with her to prevent this very thing.

An impression was taken of the lock and given to a smith to have a new key made, but by some means there was a delay about the matter, and another two months elapsed before they succeeded in gaining access to the tomb.

Meanwhile the detectives were busily searching for their prey, a large reward having been offered for Laura's apprehension.

One evening she had been engaged to sing at a soiree, given by the madam of a fashionable school in the suburbs of Chicago for the parents and friends of her pupils.

Agnes Van Dorn and her mother called to take her with them, and indeed they had come to love the fair girl so well that the latter insisted upon acting as her chaperone whenever it happened that they were both to attend the same place.

In fact, Laura consulted her almost always before making engagements, in order that she should not compromise herself by going among people with whom she would not care to mingle.

Her anxiety regarding the precarious position she occupied had in a great measure subsided as the weeks went by and no harm befell her, and everything ran on as smoothly as before she had learned that she was being searched for as a criminal.

To-night she was in unusually good spirits, and was

anticipating a great deal of pleasure in meeting the young ladies of Madam La Fontain's seminary.

She wore a dress of pale lavender silk, whose delicate color and even more subdued by the rich overdress of white Spanish lace, looped with scarlet poppies and heliotrope, "Trixy's comfort," as she called it, and always wore when she could do so without infringing upon the rules of good taste.

"What exquisite taste you have, Laura!" Agnes exclaimed, as Laura removed her long wrap and stood forth in all her delicate beauty, her eyes glowing with anticipation, her lips smiling, and a slight flush on her cheeks.

"Thank you, and I think I may well return the compliment," Laura returned, smiling and running her eye appreciatively over Miss Van Dorn's stately figure, which was resplendent in peach-colored brocade and beautiful old point, garnished with great creamy waxen camelias.

"Well, of course," Agnes laughingly assented, "where one does not have to count the cost and has a fair amount of common-sense to put along with one's money, not to mention what you have to pay for your milliner's taste, one need not be quite a fright; but I happen to know that *you* plan all your own costumes."

The word fright jarred painfully upon Laura's nerves. It brought Trixy so forcibly to her mind and all that she had suffered from having the word constantly dinned in her ears, and her bright face clouded for a moment.

"Have I said anything naughty?" Agnes asked, noting the change in her friend's countenance.

"Oh, no, indeed!" Laura returned, brightening again.

"I saw General Von Osdel in the vestibule as we entered," Agnes said, with a significant glance, as she began to put on her gloves.

"Did you?" asked Laura indifferently.

"Did I?" her friend retorted, mimicking her tone. "Don't I know what he was hovering out there for until our party entered, and didn't I see the delighted glance he shot

at our fair songstress as she entered? You have made no mean conquest there, *ma chere.*"

"Please do not insinuate anything of that kind," Laura returned, with a pained look.

"Why not, heart's delight? Can't you see how much he admires you?"

"I am afraid I do see it more than I desire to," was the grave response, while the color faded from her cheek.

She knew that the gallant general's admiration during the last two months had been no insincere sentiment, and that his delicate attentions to her were beginning to mean something more than a mere tribute to either her beauty or her talents, and the knowledge was causing her considerable uneasiness.

"Afraid, *petite!*" ejaculated the gay belle in pretended astonishment. "Why, General Von Osdel's admiration is not a thing to be afraid of or slighted," she concluded significantly.

"But, Agnes," Laura said, lifting her troubled eyes to her friend's face, "it can never be anything to me——"

"Ah! *don't* tell me the pretty romance I have been weaving will amount to nothing," Miss Van Dorn interrupted with playful reproach.

"Of course, I cannot pretend to misunderstand you," Laura resumed, even more gravely than she had yet spoken, "but I have no heart for anything of the kind, although I esteem General Von Osdel as a noble, high-minded gentleman. Please do not think of it again."

"No heart, Laurie, dear! has the precious article been already disposed of? Forgive me," she added quickly, as she saw the rich color suffuse the fair girl's face, "I had no business to talk to you in this way. Here, let me button that glove for you, and then we must go down. There comes mamma after us now."

Miss Van Dorn buttoned the glove that Laura had attempted to fasten in vain, and then, as Mrs. Van Dorn joined them, chatted gayly upon different topics to draw

her attention from the hot color which still burned in her friend's cheek.

Laura's singing that night was unusually good, and she seemed to put all her spirit into it, and every one was as enthusiastic as usual.

Everybody, too, was very kind and attentive to her, honoring her in every possible way, while the fact of her being a paid musician appeared to be ignored entirely. She was always so sweet and so lovely, so cultured and refined, that no one seemed to remember it, and she was received upon an equal footing with the most distinguished guests wherever she went.

Once while singing and facing the large company, her eyes were attracted to a quiet, gentlemanly looking individual at the further end of the room, and who seemed to be deeply interested in observing her.

He listened with the closest attention, and did not once remove his eyes from her face while she sang.

When she ceased, and mingled again with the company, he approached her and hovered about the edge of the circle which surrounded her.

When she went to the supper-room attended by General Von Osdel, who craved the honor of attending her, and whom she could not refuse without rudeness, much as she disliked to give him even this encouragement, she again found him directly opposite her at the table; and although he kept his eyes averted and talked almost incessantly to his own companion, yet somehow she was conscious that he was closely observing her, heard every word she uttered and followed her every movement.

She was not to sing again, for the remainder of the evening was to be spent socially, and by some means General Von Osdel succeeded in drawing her away from the company into a room, where paintings, drawings and other works of art by the pupils were displayed.

Here they passed from piece to piece, commenting upon their merits, until they had made the circuit of the room

and stopped in a large bay-window, which was filled with choice plants and flowers.

"Sit here and rest a moment," the attentive general said, rolling an inviting chair forward to her.

She hesitated, glanced at him and then said smilingly:

"I fear Madam La Fontain will think I have taken an unceremonious leave if I do not return to the company."

"Madam will not mind for a few moments longer, I think, and if you please, I have something I wish to say to you," he says, in tones that to a chance listener would sound low and calm, but to the fair girl who sank into the soft chair without another word of protest simply because she had no strength to oppose him, there was an undercurrent of fire and intensity that instantly told her what it was that he wished to say to her.

He stands there silent, looking down upon her for a moment and noting the lovely picture she makes with her slender, graceful figure in its tastefully arranged drapery, outlined against the dark velvet of the chair. Her bright hair is simply coiled around her small head and fastened with a circlet of pearls and diamonds. Her cheeks now are pale, the flush which had made her so beautiful all the evening having died quickly out at his words, and her delicate lids have drooped, hiding the lovely sapphire of her glorious eyes. He notices how pure and perfect her profile is, how white and slender her beautiful neck, the simple cross of pearls and diamonds, to match the circlet upon her hair that fastens the creamy white lace at her throat. He notes the delicate tracery of veins underneath the clear skin, the small hands clasped in her lap and the fragrance of heliotrope that always pervades her. She is a vision of entrancing beauty, whose pure spirit and gentle nature shine forth from every perfect feature.

He stands there and hesitates to speak, he dreads to put his hopes—strong, yearning, passionate hopes they are, too —to the test; almost instinctively he fears that his cause

is hopeless—that this beautiful woman, with her pure, strong character, will tell him that she cannot be his wife.

"Mademoiselle Pretoni," he says, in his deep, thrilling, manly tones, and bending a trifle nearer to her, "I love you, and I have brought you hither to-night to ask you to give me hope that I may win you for my wife."

He saw her sensitive mouth settle into lines of pain; he saw the white lids quiver, and those small hands clasp themselves more tightly; but he went on, the passion in his voice growing intenser with every word: "I have seen many women fair and lovely, I have long yearned for a home and the joy of my own fireside, with some sweet spirit there to cheer and love me; I have longed for a pure and gentle woman whom I could clasp to my heart and call my own, who would belong to me, wholly, unreservedly, who would live for me, and brighten all my future. Laura —forgive me if I presume, but it is the dearest name in the world to me—you alone of all others have had power to move my soul, to stir to its very center my strong nature, and bend my proud will to do you homage. I cannot tell you how or when this love for you came to me, I only know that I heard your matchless voice; it thrilled me as I had never before been thrilled; I met you, I spoke with you, I looked into the wonderful depths of your eyes, and you had won me! From that moment all peace for me was gone; I am restless, unsatisfied, miserable, save when in your presence. My love, my own love, the *only* woman whom I shall *ever* love, tell me that it is not in vain—Laurie, oh! give me one word, one look of hope."

But he knows even before he asks it that it cannot be, for, with his keen, hungry eyes fixed upon that now marble face, he has seen the regret, the pain, the almost agony that swept over it at the knowledge of the passionate, hopeless love which she had so unwittingly evoked, and the anguished prayer of his last words betrays how surely he knows that he must go on loveless to the end.

For a moment after he had concluded Laura did not

seem to have the power to move, then she arose, and turning, stood before him.

"General Von Osdel," she began, and her sad, sweet tones thrilled him with exquisite pain, "I pray that you will forgive me."

"Forgive you, Laurie—forgive you?" he asks, with trembling, eager voice.

"Yes, forgive; for, although I have enjoyed your society, and have appreciated your kindness and attention to me, I did not once think of doing you such wrong as this; I never meant to encourage you to hope for anything like what you have asked of me. My friend, if you will allow me to call you such after this, I cannot be your wife."

He drew in one quick, hard, gasping breath, and then shut his lips like a vise.

He had been in a score of battles; he had been imprisoned, wounded, half-starved, insulted, abused and never faltered. But had it been crowded into one moment of time, he could not have suffered as he did now. He was a strong, brave, true man, and the depth and intensity of his love was equaled by few in this world, but he knew how to endure and be silent—he had the soul of a hero in him—though the blanching of his cheeks, and the look of hopeless misery that came to his eyes, as he gazed upon this fair girl and knew that his hopes were forever blighted, could not fail to tell their own tale.

"Laurie, you are not one to speak lightly, and yet—oh, if I thought that *anything* in the power of man could cause you to change those hopeless words it should be accomplished," he said, with such intensity and despair that she could have sobbed aloud.

"There is nothing that can change them," she said gently, "and I can only ask you again to forgive me."

The tears gathered beneath her golden-fringed lids and rolled slowly over her cheeks, and the sight made him for the moment forget his own misery.

Involuntarily he took the delicate handkerchief she had in her hand and wiped the bright drops away.

"My dear, my dear, I am not worth one of those drops," he whispered, with womanly tenderness. "I have nothing to forgive, do not grieve for me."

But poor Laura, proud and cold, and relentless as she could be when the occasion required, could not endure this.

She turned quickly away, and bowing her head upon the back of the chair near which they were standing, sobbed convulsively.

For a moment the strong man stood gazing upon her, pity and despair mingled in his gaze.

Then, with a resolute uplifting of his grand head, he said:

"Forget, if you can, my gentle friend, how I have wounded you to-night by this confession. I would not have caused you a single pang nor a bitter tear. You cannot love me, and I will not pain you further by making you tell me so, but remember that I am an old warrior, I have fought many battles, and I shall not fall in this. Laura," how gentle and tender, yet inexpressibly sad, was his voice, "let it comfort you to know that I feel it better to have loved, and to lose you, than never to have known you. I must be true to you, while I live; I shall die loving you, but God will give me strength to bear it, and still be a *man*. Now, good-by; see, dear, I speak it bravely, my voice does not falter, for it is better that I should not pain you by staying longer, and do not grieve, dear friend, for we shall some time meet again where there are no tears nor pain."

He lifted the hand that hung by her side, touched it respectfully with his lips, and then went quietly away, closing the door after him, that she might have time to recover herself without fear of curious eyes observing her.

And Laura, striving for self-control, marveled at the grandness of the character that had been thus revealed

to her, and was almost made to feel with Byron, that in molding it,

"Nature formed but one such man
And broke the die."

CHAPTER XIX

"I AM NOT GOING TO DESERT HER"

As soon as Laura regained her self-possession she went to seek Mrs. Van Dorn, to see if she would be willing to retire, for she was so heavy-hearted that it did not seem as if she could remain in that gay company longer.

She met Agnes in the hall, told her that she would like to go home if they were willing, and Miss Van Dorn, noticing her agitation, went at once to find her mother.

As the three ladies were passing up the stairs to the dressing-room, Laura noticed that a gentleman was slowly following them.

A second look showed her that it was the same person who had watched her so closely all the evening.

Mrs. Van Dorn was the first to enter the dressing-room, Agnes following, and Laura was a few steps behind.

As she was on the point of stepping over the threshold, some one touched her on the elbow.

She turned to see who it was, and found herself confronted by the strange gentleman before mentioned.

He bowed courteously and said, very quietly but respectfully:

"I beg your pardon, Miss Preston, but it becomes my painful duty to arrest you by the authority of the law."

Laura looked up into his face with one quick, startled glance, every vestige of color forsaking her face.

Now she knew the meaning of his close observation, of his keen glances and his espionage—she knew he was one of the detectives who had been sent forth to ferret out her hiding-place.

For a moment she thought she was going to faint, she stood so motionless and was so deadly pale.

But after a moment of silence, during which she braced herself for what was to follow, she replied, as quietly as he himself had spoken:

"Very well—I understand—but for the sake of my friends and the people who are here, pray do not make the matter public to-night."

He bowed again with the utmost politeness, and returned:

"I am only too happy to regard your wishes."

He then drew back a step or two to allow her to pass into the dressing-room; but she knew that his eyes would never for one instant leave her.

She stood outside the door for a moment, considering how she should break this painful intelligence to Mrs. Van Dorn and her daughter.

She marveled at herself, for after the first shock had subsided, she was not nearly so disturbed as she had thought she should be, and she realized that in spite of the apparent security which had been hers during the past few weeks, she had been expecting that this would come; and now that it had she found herself calm and collected, feeling no anxiety as to how it all would end, but trusting to the future and the strong arm, upon which she at all times leaned, to lead her whithersoever it was right that she should go.

But it troubled her to know what she should say to Agnes—how tell the proud matron who had been so kind to her during the months she had been in the city.

"It must be done," she said, with a weary sigh, as with a resolute air she entered the dressing-room.

She found Agnes leaning against the frame of the door, pale and terrified. Mrs. Van Dorn had passed on to the farther side of the room.

Agnes had caught the word "arrest," and had stood as

if petrified, trying to catch what had followed, but everything had been so quietly done that she could hear nothing.

Now she caught Laura by both hands, crying:

"What does that man mean? Do you know him? What was he saying about an arrest?" She said it all in one breath.

Laura sighed sadly.

If she could but spare these kind friends this mortification, if she could but keep the matter still until to-morrow, that it need not be said she had been arrested for an awful crime while in their company. But it was of no use now. Agnes knew that something dreadful had happened, and now she demanded again, looking into Laura's pale face:

"Laurie, what does it mean?"

The tried girl looked up into her friend's face with an appealing glance that went straight to her heart.

"Miss Van Dorn," she said, in a sort of helpless tone, "after all your kindness to me, it seems hard to have to bring such trouble as this upon you, but I am obliged to tell you that that man is an officer, and has just arrested me."

"Great Heaven! for what?"

"Hush! let us have no scene here," Laura whispered warningly. "But do you remember that first evening after your brother's return from New York, and the story he told you of the young girl who was supposed to have been—to have been——"

The cruel word almost choked her and she could not go on.

A look of horror sprang to Agnes' eyes, but grasping the hands she still held more tightly she whispered, as a faint idea of the truth began to dawn upon her:

"Yes—oh!——"

"I am the cousin who ran away. Trixy Waldron was dear to me as a sister. I could not bear to listen to the cruel story and that was why I fainted. I am Laura Preston," Laura returned, speaking so hopelessly and sadly

that the man listening and keeping guard outside felt a suspicious moisture creeping into his eyes. He afterward said that he never undertook a job in his life that required more pluck than to step up to that girl, who looked more like an angel from heaven than a criminal, and take her into custody.

"You, Laurie Pretoni?" Agnes murmured in a dazed kind of way to Laura's revelation. "I see, I see," she went on: "I might have known if I had had my wits about me. The name is very like, and your nervousness, the torn book, your pallor and fainting. I see it all now."

Laura was regarding her very earnestly, while with a lightning-like backward glance she recalled all those events.

Would she prove the friend of sunshine? She had been so very kind, so like a sister, so attentive and thoughtful; but would adversity, this stern trial, drive her from her?

But she still kept that firm hold upon her hands; she did not draw back and look coldly on her, though her earnest eyes were searching every line of her face.

"Laura! you did not; you are not——"

She, too, choked over the words.

"No," Laura returned with a quiet dignity which carried conviction with every word, "I am guilty of no wrong toward my cousin. Bright, darling Trixy! I loved her too dearly to ever think of harming her!" and a low, heart-broken sob burst from Laura's white lips.

Agnes' arms were around her in an instant, and she drew the bright, golden head to her shoulder and laid her cheek against it.

"I know it, I know it, and it was cruel in me to breathe such a thought," she said, almost weeping with a feeling of self-reproach.

Then she continued with sudden animation and something of petulance in her tones:

"Let us go and explain it to the officer and put a stop at once to all this nonsense."

Laura smiled in spite of her trouble, and even though

Agnes' constancy more nearly upset her composure than anything else.

"It would do no good," she said; "and to tell you the truth, I have been expecting this for a long time, ever since your brother said that the detectives were searching for me."

"I wonder that the knowledge did not kill you on the spot, my poor darling!" Agnes replied, with fond sympathy.

Laura lifted her head from her shoulder and kissed the brave, true-hearted girl.

"What a dear comforter you are! How can I ever thank you for all your kindness to me? you and your mother, too! I trust you may not suffer any inconvenience or mortification on my account. But I shall go away very quietly, and I will say good-by to you here, as I shall be obliged to accompany this man, and—and—I do not exactly know where he intends to take me," Laura said with a shudder.

"Indeed, you will do no such thing," Miss Van Dorn said haughtily. "We brought you here and we shall take you away. Where is mamma? We must tell her and get her to help us."

She turned to seek Mrs. Van Dorn, but that lady had come quietly toward the two girls while they were talking and had listened to nearly all that had been said.

As it happened, fortunately for them, there was no one else in the dressing-room, and so they could make their plans without fear of being overheard.

Mrs. Van Dorn was looking very pale, but otherwise was as self-possessed as usual.

"Mamma!" Agnes cried on observing her; "you have heard——"

"Yes, my dear," she answered, approaching nearer to them.

"Is it not frightful? What can we do? Cannot we get her away somehow?" Agnes asked excitedly.

"Hush, Agnes! do not speak so loud, and let me think a moment," she returned in a grave, thoughtful tone.

Laura turned to her with trembling lips.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Van Dorn, for bringing you into this trouble also. I never meant to make any one suffer through me."

The matron passed her arm around the delicate waist and drew her toward her, looking searchingly down into her eyes.

They met hers trustfully; there was no wavering, no shrinking.

"You are a dear child," she said gently, "and we will not leave you to bear this alone. Let me think a minute."

She bent her head and stood thinking for several moments.

Madam Van Dorn, as she was often called, was deemed an exceedingly proud woman—proud of her wealth, proud of her firmly established social position, of her aristocratic name—for the Van Dorns were an ancient and honorable family, and more than all, she was proud of her bright, promising children, whom she had tried to rear free from every evil influence or worldly blight.

But it was not a vain kind of pride; it was more like an inborn self-respect for what she was, what she had and what she could do.

She was a woman of large heart and deep, warm sympathies, and of immeasurable charity—that of which Paul wrote—and of benevolence.

The "golden rule" was one that she dearly loved to follow, and the "inasmuch," as commanded and taught by those Divine lips of old, meant a great deal to her devoted heart.

She was greatly startled and shocked upon learning who Laura was and the trouble that was hanging over her.

Her first thought had been for what her own and her children's reputation would suffer when it should become known that the beautiful girl whom they had introduced

into the fashionable circle where they mingled was, in the eyes of the law, a criminal. But it was only for a moment. Her heart told her that Laura Preston was as pure and innocent of wrong as her own daughters, and with a compassionate glance into her face of almost alabaster whiteness, she said to herself:

"The dear child is guiltless, or I am no judge of human nature; she has apparently no friends on whom to lean in this dark hour; she is alone and homeless, and *I am not going to desert her in this hour of trial, let the world say what it will.*"

This was the conclusion to which she came while standing there with bent head and thoughtful, averted eyes.

With her decision she regained her usual self-possession. She turned once again to Laura.

She took her white face between her soft hands and lifted it so that she could look into it again.

Laura tried to smile, but her sweet lips trembled at the kindly touch.

" 'Let not your heart be troubled,' dear child," she whispered softly, "for we have a dear Father above, and I am going to help take care of you."

She dropped her lips for an instant on the girl's fair forehead, and then turned away, while Laura, overcome by this almost divine charity, let herself be drawn once more into Agnes' arms, dropped her head upon her shoulder, and sobbed out her gratitude there.

CHAPTER XX

A JUST REBUKE

As Mrs. Van Dorn turned from Laura she passed out into the hall to interview the gentlemanly detective, who stood patiently waiting there.

She talked with him for perhaps five minutes, and then, as people began to flock to the dressing-room, she returned to her charges, saying, with her usual cheerfulness, and as if nothing had occurred.

"Get on your wraps as quickly as you can, girls, for I am somewhat in a hurry to get home. You know that Lilly was not very well this evening."

Her own were on in a trice, and she was wrapping Laura up in her motherly way, while Agnes' trembling fingers were fastening hers.

Then they all went quietly down stairs, preceded by that quiet gentleman in the hall, and who politely held the door of the carriage open for them to enter, and then followed them into it without a word.

Once there, Mrs. Van Dorn began to plead eloquently for leniency toward Laura.

She wished to take her home with herself, giving her word that no advantage should be taken of his kindness.

But Laura said she preferred to return to her own rooms, but begged that Agnes might be permitted to accompany her and spend the night with her.

The detective consented to this arrangement, provided he could assure himself he would run no risk in doing so.

They stopped to leave Mrs. Van Dorn at her own door, but before alighting, she again took Laura into her arms, and kissing her tenderly, whispered:

"Have courage, my dear, truth must prevail. Now, good-night, and Agnes, do not let her talk, she must rest to-night."

A half-hour later those two beautiful girls lay locked in each other's embrace, but with sleepless eyes and heavily beating hearts, while the watchful detective stood like some stern sentinel outside their door, and thus the long night wore away.

The next morning the officer informed Laura that it would be necessary for them to return immediately to New York.

She had expected this, and received the intelligence very quietly, but Miss Van Dorn was considerably excited over it.

"At what hour must you go?" she asked.

He consulted a time-table that he had with him.

"The morning express has already gone," he said; "there is no other until afternoon; we must take that."

Miss Van Dorn brightened visibly at this information, for she had thought, from the way he had spoken, that he intended leaving at once, and she had a plan in mind that she wished to consult her mother about.

"I must go home for a little while, but I will return just as soon as possible," she said to Laura, and then, dispatching a servant for a carriage, she went away.

But she kept her promise, for she returned in the course of two hours, clad in a neat, though tasteful traveling-dress, and otherwise equipped for a journey.

Mrs. Van Dorn accompanied her.

"My dear," she said to Laura, "I am going to send Agnes home with you for company, and as soon as I can arrange matters here to my mind I shall follow. I have telegraphed Tom to meet you at the station, and to arrange everything just as comfortable as possible for you."

Laura could only look her thanks, it was such a comfort, such an unexpected comfort, such a thoughtful and delicate kindness for them to plan for her like this, and save her that sense of loneliness and desolation which she would have experienced to make the long journey alone with the strange detective.

Mrs. Van Dorn had brought a tempting little lunch along with her, of which they three partook together in Laura's pretty chamber, while the officer was bountifully served in the parlor.

Mrs. Van Dorn kept up a cheerful and continuous flow of talk upon indifferent topics, thus saving Agnes and Laura, who were both too miserable to converse upon any

subject, and were dreading the parting more than either was willing to betray.

The hour arrived at last, and once more the kind motherly matron took the stricken girl into her arms, and held her close to her bosom.

"My love," she said, looking straight into the sad, sad eyes raised to her, "Agnes has repeated all the sad story of your trials which you communicated to her this morning, and let me comfort you by telling you that I am just as fully convinced of your innocence as if I could look into your heart and read its every thought. I know that you will have to bear much that will be very trying and unpleasant during the next few weeks; but do not allow your courage to forsake you for one moment, for I am very confident that all will come right in the end. I shall come to you very soon and stay with you until all is over, and I have commissioned Agnes to have Tom see that you are provided with the very best counsel that can be procured. Now go forth with a brave heart, my *daughter*, and may God bless you."

My daughter! how tenderly she had uttered the word! How like a token of peace from above it came to Laura, who had not known a mother's love or care for long, long years.

She caught her breath with a little sob, her lips quivered, and she trembled from head to foot, though not a tear came to relieve the pressure upon her brain, as she wound her arms around the noble woman's neck, and laid her cheek against hers.

"Oh! how good it is in you—how you have comforted me you will never know, for I cannot tell you," she said, brokenly. "I came here lonely, desolate, almost heartbroken, and you at once took me in, stranger and alien though I was; you have poured nothing but peace and balm into my heart from the very first. And now, that this dreadful story has become known, and when I expected you and every one would turn from me with cold-

ness and scorn, thinking I had deceived you and betrayed your confidence, you only draw me closer and shield me with your love and care."

"It is because I feel that you are worthy—that you are one of the 'little ones' of whom Christ speaks," the matron said, as she gently kissed the white forehead upon her shoulder.

Laura clung to her more closely—it was so inexpressibly sweet to experience this almost divine love.

"My greatest grief has been that your kindness to me might result in injury to yourself and Agnes," she returned. "I knew that this trouble was liable to come upon me, but I kept hoping to escape it—that Mrs. Waldron would repent of her threat and let me alone. Once —after your son was here—I was tempted to tell you all about it; but the thought—the idea was so horrible to me that I could not endure to give it utterance."

"Poor child! it is all too cruel."

"But it has given you to me as a dear friend," Laura said, with a smile that was sadder than tears, "and I cannot tell you how dearly I shall love you as long as I *may live.*"

She said these last words slowly, solemnly, and with a slight shiver, and that tender woman, holding her so closely, felt a thrill of pain in every nerve, as she realized of what she was thinking; but without appearing to notice it she answered with her charming smile:

"Then I have won a third daughter. But"—as she saw that the detective was looking at his watch, and getting a trifle impatient, "it is time for you to go—good-by, my love, but only for a little while, for I shall expect to bring you back before many weeks elapse."

She embraced Agnes with yearning tenderness, for it was no small sacrifice on her part to allow her to go on this trying errand, and then they went out to the carriage that was to convey them to the depot.

The kind woman of whom Laura had hired her rooms

stood by and watched them drive away, weeping bitterly. She had grown to love the gentle girl very much, and had greatly enjoyed having her with her music in the house.

Everything was to remain just as it was until some decision regarding Laura was rendered, she having paid her for three months in advance, and with the understanding that if everything resulted in her favor she was to return, but otherwise Mrs. Van Dorn would attend to all necessary business matters.

Everything had been done so quietly and with so much consideration for Laura's feelings that very few people were aware that an arrest had been made, and she was safely back in New York before the general buzzing began and the righteous indignation of outraged Mrs. Grundy broke forth.

Then Mrs. Van Dorn was beset from every quarter and, as she expected, received her full share of blame for the part she had borne in the drama.

But she maintained herself, as she well knew how to do, with undisturbed self-possession and in some instances with haughty indifference.

She had the consciousness within of having done right, of having performed a noble act, and she was too sure of her own position in the social world to allow herself to be ruffled in the least degree.

"How could you impose such a fraud upon us, my dear Mrs. Van Dorn?" exclaimed pretty Mrs. Greville, in an assumed tone of playful reproach, yet with a premeditated sting in the words, when she called, a few days after Laura's departure, just to see how she bore it.

Mrs. Van Dorn arched her shapely eyebrows and looked her guest steadily in the face as she replied:

"My dear Mrs. Greville, may I inquire just what you mean by a *fraud?*"

"Why, a person who pretends to be what she is not, of

course," the little lady answered hesitatingly and with brightened color.

"Then I fear I shall have to feel as indignant as the multitude, for one is constantly being imposed upon in society."

It was very calmly and quietly uttered, but it was a sharp hit and it told.

Poor Mrs. Greville's ruffled feathers instantly fell trailing in the dust, for it was a well-known fact to Mrs. Van Dorn that Polly Marietta Ferguson, or more elegantly now, Mrs. Maria Greville, was once a poor girl of uncultivated family, and one who had been obliged to earn her living in the watch factory out at Elgin.

Mrs. Greville colored vividly, but she was not to be so easily eclipsed, although she well knew of what Mrs. Van Dorn was thinking, and she returned, with some show of spirit:

"But to introduce a hardened criminal, a *murderess,* into one's intimate circle, not to mention the injury done your own family by being so familiarly associated with her," and the fashionable lady drew her costly shawl about her shoulders with an expressive shudder.

"I fear you and society at large are agitating yourselves unnecessarily, Mrs. Greville," Mrs. Van Dorn returned, with exasperating coolness. "I regret if any of you feel degraded by the very marked attention you have all been so eager to show Miss Preston. I assure you I do not."

Again Mrs. Greville colored; she was no match for this proud, grand woman, and she had been very enthusiastic in her admiration of Laura.

"The very fact of her giving a false name is against her," she said sharply.

"She left out one letter of her own name and added one to it; that was surely an unpardonable offense," Mrs. Van Dorn answered sarcastically.

But she was not a woman who enjoyed wounding another, and though she would not yield an inch of ground

in the battle for Laura, yet she would not take a mean advantage over an enemy and rather regretted the thorn she had already planted in Mrs. Greville's weak armor.

"My friend," she said, her whole face beaming with the goodness of her heart, "let us all practice a trifle more of charity in our daily lives. We are all liable to meet misfortune, and there is no knowing in what form it may come to us. Miss Preston, over whom society is just now so much exercised, is, I believe, a pure and lovely girl. She has been highly educated and carefully reared, not to mention the refinement which naturally belongs to her. Besides all this she is heiress to a very large fortune, and until within the past few months has occupied a position in the social world equal to your own and mine."

"Of course, I know all this—it was in the papers; and, according to my idea, it makes it so much the worse to think that a girl brought up as she has been could harden herself to murder her own beautiful cousin."

Mrs. Van Dorn was beginning to get out of patience.

"No one can be a very good judge of character who can look into her clear, beautiful eyes and innocent face and believe that of her," she said coldly.

Then she added, with gentle reproof:

"I believe it is always best to judge as kindly as we can of everyone. Circumstantial evidence seems to indicate that she has been guilty of a crime, but I am confident that she is as innocent of it as either you or I. Let us remember, my dear Mrs. Greville, that we are all made after the image of a divine pattern—that we are temples for the indwelling of the Spirit of Him who said: 'Blessed are the merciful!' If we practice the lessons of charity which He taught we can never injure ourselves, and we may thus be prevented from committing many a wrong and of benefiting others."

She held out her hand kindly at parting and the gay woman of the world went home, thinking more seriously

of the "golden rule" than she had ever done in her life before.

Mrs. Van Dorn was not as gracious as this toward all who mocked over Laura's calamity, but she had in a moment of impulse, and in her eagerness to vindicate the beautiful songstress, wounded Mrs. Greville in a sensitive spot, and though she knew it might do her good in the end, she did not wish to be malicious.

No one gained any sympathy from her for the imaginary injury they claimed to have sustained by patronizing the "star" she had introduced. She would not hear one word of censure, or in condemnation of Laura.

She felt sure she would come off victor in the end, dark and unpromising as the future looked for her just at present. She would not allow Agnes to be blamed in her presence for clinging to a friend in adversity, and she went calmly on her way, maintaining her position, indifferent alike to scorn and pretended sympathy, with a feeling of pity and contempt for the weakness and fickleness that could turn with so much bitterness and malice against a defenseless girl, to whom but a few days before they had yielded such homage and admiration.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MISSING WILL

Laura Preston was in prison. The delicate, cultivated, sensitive girl was now the occupant of a gloomy cell, securely locked behind bolts and bars like any other criminal who was suspected of having outraged the laws of the land.

Doctor Van Dorn met the party upon their arrival at the station, as his mother had telegraphed him to do, and accompanied them to Laura's cell, which he had had made as comfortable and inviting as he had been permitted to

do; and here Agnes was obliged to leave the friend to whom she had been so faithful and kind.

She gave her one long, agonized embrace, promising to come to her at the earliest opportunity on the morrow, and then went away, crushed and miserable, with her brother, while Laura was locked in alone with her bitterness and sorrow.

She bore it bravely, however; she was calm and collected and betrayed no weak repining, no vain regrets or fears, no disgust at her coarse and repulsive surroundings, which gained her the admiration of the detective and the sympathy of the rough but not unkind jailer.

Laura, however, was sustained in a great measure by the hope of seeing Eliot.

"He will surely come to me to-morrow," she thought, *he* will not desert me in such an hour, and he will advise me what course to pursue, and it will be such a comfort to have him to rely upon. I wonder if Aunt Roxy will come to see me?"

But Mrs. Roxena Waldron had no such intention; she had no desire to face the beautiful girl whom she was hunting to her death, or at least to her ruin, and so kept herself at a discreet distance from the place where she was incarcerated.

But, alas for Eliot Harcourt, and the help that he would gladly have given her, the maiden he so dearly loved. He lay at that moment writhing in the clutches of a violent brain fever, and Doctor Van Dorn had his heart and hands more than full with anxiety for his friend, interest in Laura's sad case, and the many other patients who claimed his time and attention, and he had not had the heart to tell her on that first day of the jeopardy her friend was in.

Eliot had been terribly anxious regarding Laura's disappearance, and the vindictiveness with which Mrs. Waldron was pursuing her, and this, together with hard and incessant labor, for he was diligently improving every

moment of his time trying to finish some pictures and a piece of statuary for the exhibition, wore upon him to such a degree that his constitution at length succumbed, and he was prostrated in a way that for a time gave very little encouragement to hope for recovery.

And now a strange and unexpected circumstance occurred.

One day, upon returning from her lawyer's office, Mrs. Waldron found a telegram awaiting her.

It was from a distant state, and contained the information that her father's only surviving brother lay at the point of death, and desired her to come to him at once.

This man, John Hixon, was one whom she knew very little about. He was an elder brother, and must be now between seventy and eighty years of age.

He had gone West when she was but a child, and had only visited his relatives this way twice during all that time, once before her marriage, when she was about fifteen years old, and once since, but she did not see him at all at this time, although he had been detained at her father's for several weeks by illness.

She knew that he had buried his wife many years ago, but of his children—two, a son and daughter—she knew nothing.

She was undecided what to do regarding the summons at first, but something seemed to impel her to obey it, and notwithstanding the many cares she had just at present on her mind, she finally resolved to go to him.

She found him indeed very near the eternal door, but he was conscious, and, upon learning that she had arrived, he requested an immediate interview with her.

"Roxena," he said, after the hurried greeting was over, "I have but little to say, and that I must say quick. You know my old woman died fifteen years ago, and John and

Anna, who never married, were both buried more than six years ago. That left me alone in the world, and you are now my only living relative. I have accumulated a handsome property, and as I did not care about strangers spending it, I have made a will leaving everything to you——"

A fit of coughing seized him just here, and it was some time before he could go on; but the burden which rolled from the heart of that woman sitting beside him is indescribable. She would be a beggar no longer, the doubtful future was all provided for, there would be no more worry and anxiety over ways and means, for everything around indicated that her uncle was a man of no limited wealth, and she could once again resume the position which she had always occupied in the social world.

The joy and relief that she experienced was so unexpected, so startling, that for a moment it deprived her of all strength, while the lines of care and perplexity seemed to fade as if by magic from her face.

But his next words sent a bitter pang through her heart.

"And Emeline," he concluded, panting with exhaustion from the paroxysm.

"My will," he continued, after resting a moment or two, "was made six years ago, after John and Ann died, but before Emeline was taken away. I did not change it, for I had heard that she left a son, who was comparatively nothing, and who has to struggle to earn his living. Emie was a favorite of mine—as she was of every one who knew her—and once did me a good turn, which I have never forgotten. She was no kin, of course, being your step-mother's daughter by her first husband, and so could inherit nothing from me, and that was why I made a will, as I wanted her to share with you. The document is all made out, and everything is all right. I have appointed an executor who is perfectly upright and honorable, and who will see that everything is carried out according to my directions."

"It is very kind of you, Uncle John, I am sure," Mrs. Waldron said sweetly, as he paused again from weariness.

"No, it is not particularly kind," he said shortly, "for I have no great affection for you; you are almost a stranger to me, though you are my brother's child; and if I had had any one who belonged directly to me you wouldn't have got a cent. But I did want Emeline to have something, though as she is dead her son must have it; you will make no fuss; you will see that nothing prevents him getting his share?" and he turned a searching glance upon her face.

"Certainly, uncle, your wishes shall be obeyed," Mrs. Waldron returned, but a deep flush suffused her face and she moved uneasily in her chair.

She wondered what the property would amount to, and began to fume inwardly that it must be divided.

What right had Emeline's son to any of it? There was not a drop of kindred blood in their veins, and she instantly found herself regarding him in the light of an usurper.

It seemed as if she must be balked in everything.

If this old man had died without a will she would naturally inherit every dollar of his property; but here he had willed half of it away from her, and to one whom she had begun to dislike for opposing her and for the confession he had made to her regarding Laura.

If her plans failed in that direction and he should marry her he would have the handling of that immense fortune and this also. It was almost more than her patience could endure as she sat beside that death-bed and thought of all this.

"What is Emeline's son's name? I have forgotten," the sick man demanded after another pause.

"Harcourt—Eliot Harcourt," she answered with compressed lips.

"Yes, yes; I remember now, and a fine, bright little chap he was, too, when I saw him. I went to visit your father once after you were married, you know; he was then living with Emeline, who was a widow. I had a ter-

rible run of fever while there and she nursed me through it as tenderly as if I had belonged to her. I have never forgotten it. She was a sweet, gentle little woman. Be sure you see that her boy has his due."

"Most certainly, uncle," was the bland reply, "but who did you say was to be the executor of your will."

"I didn't say," he said, with another sharp glance at her, "but I don't know as it matters if I tell you. His name is Von Osdel; he has been a general in the army, and a true and noble gentleman he is, too. He lives in Chicago. He has been telegraphed to and ought to be here now; I want to see him," the old man concluded uneasily.

"If he shouldn't come before it is too late, you'll have to tell him where my will is," he began again, after thinking deeply for several moments.

"Yes—yes, anything you wish, uncle," Mrs. Waldron said with smothered eagerness.

"The will is in my desk, in the right-hand upper drawer, and the key is in the till of my safe. Roxena, you are sure you understand my wishes; you will follow them—you will not allow any trouble to be made?" and again he turned anxiously toward her, searching her face as he had previously done.

He had never seen her but once before, and then she was a young girl; but it seemed as if he knew, dying though he was, almost by intuition, that by nature she was treacherous and false.

"Dear uncle, do not give yourself any uneasiness, your money shall go where it rightly belongs," she returned in soothing tones, while she tenderly wiped the death dew that was gathering upon his brow.

Her touch, gentle though it was, appeared to irritate him, and he moved feebly away from it.

"I am tired," he whispered; "go and send the nurse to me; but, Roxena, remember, half is for you and half for Emeline's son. Emeline was good to me; I liked her;

why don't you tell her? yes, yes, old woman, I've stood it a good while alone, but—I'm coming now."

He was wandering, and Mrs. Waldron saw that he could not live very much longer, and as she was in no wise anxious to be left there alone with him at the last moment, she hastily summoned the nurse.

That night old John Hixon died—died before he had seen the friend he had sent for, and only Roxena Waldron knew where his will was kept and no one in all the world knew that she knew it.

Three days later the rich man was buried, and after the funeral the friends assembled in the library to search for and read the will.

Just as they had assembled for this purpose a carriage drove furiously to the door and a noble-looking man alighted. Mrs. Waldron, sitting by the window, saw him and her face lost every atom of its color, for she surmised at once whom it might be.

It was General Von Osdel, Laura's unfortunate lover, and the particular friend of old John Hixon, although he was so many years his junior. He had once rendered him a noble service, since when the old man had treated him as a son.

He had not been in the city when the telegram was sent, having been away on business; but on returning he had hastened with all speed to obey the summons, and only arrived at this moment.

He was introduced to Mrs. Waldron, who greeted him with all the graciousness of which she was capable, and then the lawyer at once proceeded to business.

"Where is the will?" he asked.

There was no reply.

"Where are his keys?" was the next query. "If no one knows anything about the will it must be searched for."

"The keys to his desk are in his safe, and the key to that the master always kept in that little ebony box on

the mantel under the clock," the housekeeper respectfully informed him.

This was brought forth, the safe thoroughly examined, also the desk, even to the *little right-hand upper drawer,* but no will was forthcoming.

"There is no will," the lawyer said, when every nook had been ransacked.

"There *was* a will," the housekeeper firmly asserted, and looking very much disturbed, for she had every reason to believe that she had been liberally remembered in it.

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, sir, for I was called upon to sign it as a witness."

"How long ago? Within a few months?"

"No, sir, but several years ago."

"Ah! then he must have changed his mind and destroyed it," returned the lawyer.

"I think not," General Von Osdel now said, and speaking for the first time, "for I was present at the time the will was signed, and know that I was appointed as one of the executors. I have received letters at different times since, and he has mentioned the matter at least two or three times, speaking as if his wishes were still the same."

"It is very strange," said the lawyer thoughtfully.

General Von Osdel proposed another search.

It was made, but only resulted in disappointment, and it was finally admitted by all that old John Hixon must have changed his mind regarding the disposition of his property and destroyed his will.

But the general was not satisfied. He felt convinced that his friend had not done so; that he had made a will simply because he wished some one who could not legally inherit to share his wealth, and if he had destroyed the will all possibility of this was cut off, and it became a matter of perplexity and anxiety; he felt sure, too, that if any such thing had been done he would have been informed of it.

The next query was:

"Who, then, are the heirs?" and it was discovered that Mrs. William Waldron was his only living relative.

General Von Osdel's keen, inquiring glance was instantly fixed upon her, but she was serenely unconscious, or apparently so, of his observation.

It was a trying moment for her, notwithstanding her assumed indifference, but she had not been a thorough woman of the world for so long for nothing, and she now displayed great tact and self-possession.

"It is greatly to be regretted," she said, with disarming frankness, when it was finally decided that she was the heir, "that the will was missing, if there is one existing; and if this gentleman"—turning to General Von Osdel—"can remember what my uncle's wishes were regarding his servants and retainers I shall be most happy to fulfill them."

"This gentleman" coldly declined to assume the responsibility of repeating any of the bequests of the will, but he felt quite sure that there was some one whom his friend wished to share equally with Mrs. Waldron.

"Who could it be?" she asked innocently, and meeting his eyes with a glance of thoughtful inquiry.

"Have you no relative who is in need in whom Mr. Hixon was interested?" he asked.

"None. I have neither brother nor sister living. Indeed, I never had a sister, except the daughter of my stepmother. We *called* ourselves sisters while we lived together, but in reality there was no kinship between us. She is dead, however, and has been for several years."

"Has she no children?"

"Yes, one; a young man of whom I have always been very fond, and he is now a rising artist of New York. Do you think he could have been the one?"

"I have the impression that he was," General Von Osdel said meditatively. "Mr. Hixon did not read me the whole of his will; he mentioned a few bequests, and spoke of a woman of whom he appeared to think a great deal; he also

said something about her death in one of his letters afterward, and then spoke of an heir. I should not be surprised if he is the person he meant."

"How unfortunate that you are not quite sure," Mrs. Waldron said regretfully.

General Von Osdel measured her a moment with his searching glance, then with a bow, turned and left her.

And thus Mrs. William Waldron, in a few short days, was raised from poverty to affluence, and became the possessor of a property valued at a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

But even this did not satisfy her avaricious soul.

"What is it in comparison with Laura's?" she said bitterly to herself, when thinking it over. "Half of it to Emeline's son, indeed! It rightly belongs to me, every penny of it, and I will have it. But I wish now that—that *I had let Laura alone.*"

CHAPTER XXII

"WHO IS SHE?"

When Laura heard of Eliot's dangerous illness, it seemed to remove her strongest support, and although she made no complaint, yet she failed visibly under it.

Doctor Van Dorn came often, as often as his duties would allow, to see her, and gave her that encouragement he could conscientiously, but the case was a very critical one, she readily saw by his manner, and the anxiety that she experienced wore upon her fearfully.

Agnes came every day that she was allowed to do so, and while she was with her Laura strove to appear brave and cheerful, but as soon as she was left alone again a melancholy settled upon her, and she would sit for hours in one position, her hands folded idly in her lap, her bright

head bent upon her bosom, her eyes fixed with a sort of hopeless stare upon the floor.

Daily she grew paler, thinner and more spirituelle in appearance, and Doctor Van Dorn began to fear that she would fade away before the day of her trial arrived.

The young physician was growing poor and pale, too. He became abstracted, almost gloomy, and although he strove to be attentive to his sister, and would allow nothing to cause him to neglect the fair prisoner, yet something appeared to be wearing upon him as well as upon Laura.

He always gave her an encouraging word, however.

"It will all come right, Miss Preston," he would say in his hearty, cheerful tones. "Keep up your courage and we'll have you both among us again very shortly."

And then he would go back to Eliot Harcourt's bedside, and watch and fight the dread disease which was consuming him, as if his own future hopes depended upon his recovery.

"What shall I do? I feel as if a mountain was crushing me," he murmured, as he returned to his hotel one morning for an hour of rest after having watched by Eliot's bed all night.

He thought he was alone and threw himself wearily into a chair, leaned his arms upon a table and buried his haggard face in them.

A light touch upon his shoulder startled him and made him look up.

Agnes was standing by his side.

"What is it, brother, that is troubling you so," she asked. "Is Mr. Harcourt worse?"

"No better, no worse," he muttered gloomily; "but bad enough—bad enough."

"Is there anything else that is troubling you?" she asked, searching his face anxiously.

"What makes you ask that?" he demanded abruptly, and with a suspicious glance at her.

"I don't know, but I think there is. It does not appear

to me that a physician should allow himself to become so completely unnerved over the case of a patient as you are over Mr. Harcourt."

"But he is my best friend, Agnes," her brother returned, and she noticed that he avoided her eye, as if fearful of betraying something more than mere anxiety for his friend.

"That may be, Tom, but there are others who love you, and you owe them a duty, my brother. Try to spare yourself a little for us," and she bent down to kiss him with tears in her eyes.

"You are a good girl, Agnes," he returned tenderly, and deeply touched by the act, "but this is *wretched* business from beginning to end."

He started up from his chair and began pacing the floor with rapid, impatient strides.

Agnes watched him uneasily, but she said no more, although she felt sure that something more serious than his anxiety for his friend was wearing upon him.

After a long silence, broken only by those uneven pacings, the doctor again took his hat and went out, while his sister relieved her burdened heart with a hearty fit of weeping.

She was lonely and homesick, almost heart-sick and discouraged.

Her mother had been obliged to delay coming to her on account of the illness of Lilian, and it was no light thing for her to be there, a stranger in that great city, worried and anxious about her brother, and burdened for her friend, for whom she began to fear there was very little hope, since public opinion seemed to be very strong against her.

But her weeping was not of long duration, for in the midst of it Mrs. Van Dorn arrived, and with the advent of her cheerful face and strong, hopeful spirit the clouds began to disperse, and it was not long before everything assumed a different aspect.

Doctor Van Dorn appeared much relieved at his mother's

arrival, and immediately asked to see her alone, as he had something of great importance to communicate to her and to ask her advice upon.

This confirmed Agnes' fears regarding her suspicions of her brother, and when Mrs. Van Dorn returned to her it was evident that she had been weeping.

"You are anxious about Tom, as well as I, mamma," Agnes said, regarding her mother's red eyes, with a choking sensation in her throat.

"Yes, dear, he looks care-worn and nearly sick, and is almost crushed with all this anxiety; he has been telling me about Mr. Harcourt and Laura; how dark everything looks for them. But we must not repine, we must remember that a skillful, unerring hand spins the thread of every life. My darling, God will do *just* what is *best,*" Mrs. Van Dorn answered with grave tenderness.

"What a dear comforter you are, mamma," Agnes said, with a nervous laugh, while she laid her head upon her shoulder and wound her arms about her waist.

"But," she added, "I am afraid Tom is in some deep trouble."

Mrs. Van Dorn looked sober, but she merely replied:

"Tom has too many patients on his hands just now. He is obliged to spend a great deal of time with his friend, and his other cares harass him."

Agnes knew well enough that there was something deeper than this, but it was evident that her brother wished no one in his confidence but his mother just at present, and she let the matter rest.

"It will do him good, mother dear, to have you here, as it has already done me," she said, the tears again springing to her eyes.

"Poor child! home is the best place in the world, isn't it? and you have been grieving after it," Mrs. Van Dorn returned fondly, adding more cheerfully:

"I have missed you, too, sadly, but what shall I do when somebody takes you away altogether?"

"Somebody will have to wait a good while first, I am thinking," Agnes said, blushing, then growing sad again, she continued:

"But I cannot think of anything now save these troubles and poor Laura. Oh, mamma! she has grown so white, and thin and sad. It will break your heart to see her."

"It will come out right," Mrs. Van Dorn still confidently asserted, and then Doctor Van Dorn called her away again.

"Agnes," said her brother, the morning following his mother's arrival, "will you do me a favor?"

"A favor, you blessed boy! Of course I will—forty if you wish," she returned eagerly.

"Thanks; I'll be reasonable, and only ask one of you for to-day. I have a patient in the house here, who has been sick a long time, the case has been very tedious and trying one, but if no new feature displays itself I think everything will go well now; can I persuade you to go and sit with her for a little while? she needs to see a young face."

"Yes, indeed. Who is she?"

"Miss Lightwell—Bessie Lightwell," he said, and Agnes noticed that he changed color slightly as he spoke the name, and his voice softened perceptibly when he said "Bessie."

"Ah! the landlady's daughter! Certainly, Tom, I shall be glad to go to her, or do anything to help lift that cloud of care from your brow."

"You are a dear sister, and I'm afraid I've neglected you since you have been here," the young doctor said regretfully.

"Nonsense! you mean you have neglected yourself—and shamefully, too," Agnes retorted. "How old is Miss Bessie, and how does it happen that I have not heard that she was sick before?"

"I have had too much to do for my patients to talk *about* them, and Miss Lightwell has been too ill to see any one but her attendants, until within the last day or two; indeed, she is not really able to receive visitors now, only

I thought the sight of your bright face might cheer her up a trifle, she is getting a little low-spirited."

"Why do you not send mamma? she is the best medicine that I know of for low-spirited people," Agnes said, smiling archly at her mother.

"For you and me, perhaps," her brother answered, "but I think I will take you to-day. Come, if you are ready, for I've just three minutes in which to perform the introduction, and then I must be off, for duty calls."

"Is Mr. Harcourt better this morning?" Agnes asked, as she arose to follow him, and instinctively feeling that he was not quite so disheartened as he had been the day before.

"I am not quite sure," he said, growing grave again, "but I feel as if there is a hair's breadth more chance for him to-day than yesterday. But about my patient here, she is still very weak and in a critical condition; you must not speak of anything that is in the least degree disagreeable or exciting—you may read to her, if she likes something light and entertaining, or chat about the fashions, the weather, and so forth."

"I will be very discreet, I promise you," Agnes said.

He led her toward a room in the rear of the house, and at length tapped upon the door.

Without waiting for an invitation to enter, he opened the door and walked into the room, Agnes following. She caught sight as she did so, of a very white face, a pair of very large dark eyes, and of a shining head, whose short, crisp, raven locks clung in graceful rings all over it, lying upon a pile of pillows on the bed at the opposite side of the large and cheerful apartment. It was a very sweet and attractive face, Agnes thought, although it was so wan and white.

The young girl looked up with a glad smile as the doctor approached her bed, and a faint flush tinged her cheek.

"How are you this morning, Bessie?" he asked, bending

down to take her hand, while Agnes was astonished at the tender cadence which his voice assumed.

"You good man—to come so early. I am really better to-day, at least I feel as frisky as a kitten," the sick girl answered, in bright, cheerful tones.

Doctor Van Dorn laughed.

"You'll do for a kitten, you small piece of humanity, but I don't know about the other part of your statement. How would you like a visitor? I've brought my sister to see you, as I promised," and he beckoned Agnes to approach.

She came forward, and the young invalid held out one little white hand, with a frank, sweet smile.

"It is very kind of you to come," she said, while her great eyes searched Agnes' face with a glance which thrilled her through and through.

"I do not feel as if you are a stranger, for your brother has told me so much about you, and I have been teasing him to bring you for a long time; but he is such a tyrant," with an arch glance at Doctor Van Dorn, "that he would not say 'yes' until yesterday. Sit down here, now, and let me look at you; you are not a bit like him."

Agnes felt instantly drawn toward the invalid, she was so fresh, sweet, and simple in her manner; and she took the seat indicated, expressing her pleasure at being able to come to relieve the monotony of her sick-room.

"I'm a tyrant, am I?" Doctor Van Dorn said, shaking his finger at his patient in mock displeasure. "I have not time to argue the point with you just now, but I shall not forget it, you black-eyed midget. Now you two may chatter like a couple of magpies for just one little half-hour, and then, Agnes, you must go; be sure you tell her what the fashions are, for pretty soon she will need to be thinking about such vanities; tell her what you have been doing in Chicago this winter, and anything *pleasant* that you can think of, but when the half-hour is up, mind you scatter, or I shall——"

He did not finish his threat, but backed out of the room, laughing lightly, and shaking his finger menacingly at them both.

Agnes regarded him with surprise.

Could this be the same man who had been so gloomy and distressed only yesterday, who had gone about with moody brow, firm-set lips, with no smile, and scarce a word for any one?

Now his face was clear, his lips smiling, his eyes tender, his tones gentle as a woman's.

Who was this frail girl? what was there about her to charm him thus? or was it only an assumed lightness, an appearance of gayety and cheerfulness, put on for the sake of a patient in whom he was deeply interested?

"It *is* good to see some one young like myself, and bright and *well*," Bessie said, as the door closed, and looking up into Agnes' beautiful face. "You cannot be much older than I," she added, tucking one small hand under her cheek and nestling contentedly back upon her pillows.

"I am nineteen, nearly twenty," Agnes replied.

"And I am seventeen; but any one would not believe me to be over seven," the sick girl said, laughing, as she held up one of her wasted hands, and ran the other through her short, clustering curls.

"You do look very young; I should not think you more than fifteen," responded her companion.

"If that brother of yours would only let me get up and put on some long skirts, I think I should begin to feel young-ladyish again; but he has me so completely under that arbitrary thumb of his, that I've nearly lost my identity, and I do not dare to move unless he says '*presto* change.'"

Agnes smiled.

"Tom said you were lonely and low-spirited; I do not think you appear to be so," she said.

"Who could be low-spirited when he is around? If he comes to talk with me for ten minutes I am happy for

half a day," the young girl said naively; "but sometimes he cannot get time to run in to see me but once, and then I do get lonely lying here and looking at the same things all day. Shall you stay in New York long?"

"Some weeks longer, probably; my mother arrived last evening."

"Ah! that beautiful mother of whom I have heard your brother speak. Are you like her?"

Agnes laughed merrily at this question.

"I should not dare to tell you that I am if Tom has spoken of her in that way. I should not like to appropriate your compliment."

"Is it a compliment? Well, then I do not believe one would do for you both," Bessie returned, with a look of undisguised admiration at her visitor.

"I shall have to run away from such barefaced flattery as that," Agnes said gayly; then to change the subject she asked, glancing at some birds at the other end of the room: "Are those your birds in the window?"

"Yes. Tom, Dick, and Harry, I call them," Bessie replied, with a low silvery laugh. "They are not very elegant names, but I like them all," and she colored slightly. "Dick and Harry are old settlers here, but Tom belongs to a friend who asked me to give him a bit of my sunlight."

Agnes thought she could tell by the increasing flush on the invalid's cheek to whom the little songster belonged, and why he had been christened "Tom."

"How long have you been ill?" she asked.

"Oh, ever so long; too long to talk about," Bessie said, with a sigh, then added: "What a lovely way you have of doing your hair! It looks like satin, and it must take you a long while. I shall get rid of all such fuss for the present, but I look like a boy with my curly crop," and again she ran her fingers through the pretty curls that clustered around her face.

"They are becoming to you, and when your cheeks fill out and get rosy you will look like a picture," Agnes said,

thinking that she was very like a picture now, and feeling more and more drawn toward her.

They chatted on until the tiny clock chimed the half hour after ten, and then Agnes instantly arose.

"I have overstayed my time five minutes," she said, with a look of surprise.

"Oh, I am so sorry—not that you have stayed, but because the time is up. Come again to-morrow, will you?"

"Yes, if Tom says so."

"He will, he *must*. I'm going to begin to show him that I have a will of my own as well as he," and the little lady nodded her head mischievously as she waved her hand in farewell to her new friend, and Agnes returned to her mother, who listened with a peculiar smile while she related her interview, and spoke of the sweet little stranger who had so strongly appealed to her sympathies and good will.

CHAPTER XXIII

"HAVE YOU TOLD HER?"

Agnes did go again and again to visit the little invalid, and always came away leaving a little more of her heart behind her, a fact which seemed to please Doctor Van Dorn exceedingly, who, strange to say, always had plenty of time to listen to her praises.

Indeed, Bessie Lightwell was a frank, beautiful pure-hearted child—happy and cheerful in spite of the wearisome hours that she was obliged to spend upon her bed, though she always made light of it, if any one mentioned the subject, instantly changing it to talk of something entirely foreign to it.

Agnes judged that she must have been a merry-hearted little thing when she was well, and full of pranks and mischief, perhaps. But she saw that beneath the bright

and sparkling surface, there was an undercurrent of deep and earnest feeling; for now and then she would give utterance to some sweet, pure thought, that betrayed a good deal of character and much depth of thought.

Sometimes Doctor Van Dorn would come into the room while they were together—for Eliot had now safely passed the crisis of his disease, and would live, if nothing new set in—and Agnes always noticed that same change in his manner that she had observed the first time she had seen Bessie.

It was as if he had come into a new world, leaving every care and trouble outside, and lived only for her while he was there; and it gradually began to dawn upon her mind that her brother had grown to love the frail little maiden whom he had been instrumental in restoring to health—or rather the hope of returning health.

One afternoon Agnes had been with her more than an hour when the young doctor suddenly came in upon them. Bessie had been permitted to be dressed for the first time to-day, and sit up by the window, and she looked very lovely, though fragile, in her pure white wrapper, with a crimson shawl flung lightly over her shoulders, as she lay back in the great arm-chair and enjoyed this new luxury.

Agnes, however, had thought that she was unusually quiet and reserved, though her eyes were brighter, and there was a deeper tinge of color in her cheek than she had ever seen there before.

The doctor walked over to her now, and took his post behind her chair, where he could look down upon her, and it was with a very tender, satisfied expression that he did so.

"Agnes," he said, glancing up at his sister. "I think you must be a good nurse, for this little girl has been growing steadily better ever since you began your visits to her!"

"Thank you, Tom, I am glad I have been of some use

for once in my life," Agnes answered, smiling, while the "little girl" referred to flashed a look from her great eyes up to the speaker, which plainly indicated that she did not think the credit *all* belonged to Miss Agnes Van Dorn.

"How is the pulse to-day, my small woman?" the doctor asked, reaching down and capturing one of the little members that had been idly toying with a bunch of carnations that he had tossed into her lap upon entering the room.

Agnes had thought of late that he was in the habit of holding those thin hands much longer than the occasion required; but now she was amazed to see him deliberately slip a beautiful ring, with a great, gleaming diamond in it, upon one of those tiny fingers, and then cover the whole hand with his broad palm, while the young girl's fair face flushed a rich, warm crimson, as she shot a sort of appealing look up at him and then at Agnes.

"Have you told her, little one?" he asked, loud enough for his sister to hear.

Those great eyes fell, the curly head drooped, and the delicate face grew rosier than before, while her pretty lips formed a voiceless negative.

"I told you to," said the doctor, a tender smile on his lips, as he viewed the by no means unattractive picture of confusion before him.

Up came both head and eyes now, the latter with a saucy look of defiance in them, though the rich color did not abate one whit, and the strong man laughed outright, a glad, triumphant laugh.

"Agnes," he said, turning to his astonished sister, "I told this young rebel here to inform you that she was to become Mrs. Tom Van Dorn just as soon as she is able to attend a little more to the fashions and follies of the times. Perhaps, however, you may be able to expedite matters for us somewhat by suggestions, as doubtless you have had recent dealings with the arbitrary fairy who governs their laws."

"*Tom!*" exclaimed Agnes, longing to shake her brother,

"you are a naughty boy not to have told me of this yourself before, instead of confusing this poor child so. Bessie," —coming to her and kneeling down by her side—"I am glad; I shall be delighted to have another sister."

"Shall you, really?" the young girl interrupted eagerly, and with lips that trembled. "I was afraid you might not like it."

"Is that the reason you have been so quiet and reserved, almost sad, to-day?" Agnes inquired, kindly.

"I did not mean to be reserved, but I am such a useless piece of humanity just now, and liable to be for a good while yet I fear," she returned, tremulously.

"Do not let that trouble you, dear, and I'm sure if Tom takes you in hand you need not fear about the future, judging from the past," and Agnes kissed her heartily and fondly.

"I have one comfort, however," Bessie said, looking really happy and relieved at this warm reception, while she cast another saucy glance at her manly lover, "in thinking that the doctor will have a chance to keep his hand in, practicing upon *one patient* if all others fail him"

"Hush that nonsense, you little croaker!" Doctor Van Dorn laughed. "I shall have plenty of patients, but my wife will not be among them. You're good for half a century or more yet, mousie; though," dropping his voice tenderly, "it *has* been a pretty hard pull for you during the past few months."

"To-morrow," he continued more lightly, ""Agnes is going on a little shopping excursion to order you a carriage dress, and the first mild morning I am going to drive you to the park and bring you back with some real roses in your cheeks; these don't amount to anything," and he pinched her still crimson cheek, with a light laugh.

"Oh! if I can get out into the air once more I believe I *shall* get well," she said with an eager, longing light in her eyes.

"Of course you will, but you have not told me what you

think of this yet," her lover answered as he uncovered the glittering stone upon her finger.

"It is beautiful, isn't it, Agnes?" the happy girl asked, with a half deprecating glance at her lover's sister.

She had never addressed her thus before, and she was not quite sure that she would be pleased with the liberty.

"It is truly, you timid dear, and now that you have broken the ice don't let it freeze again," Agnes returned, kissing her again, then she added:

"But I see that Tom has had the ring made too large, for a chance, I suppose, for your finger to grow. You'll have to have a guard, and here is just the thing on my watch-chain. It is one I used to wear until my finger grew too large. You shall have it as the seal to our new relationship."

She took it from the chain and placed it above the diamond engagement ring, and it proved to be just what was needed, while Bessie's fair face beamed with pleasure over the gift.

"Now good-by," she said, rising, "I am off to tell mamma this delightful piece of news."

"She knows it already," her brother sang out after her, but she either did not or would not hear, and the lovers were left alone.

"Now I have found out why Tom looked so troubled and depressed when he was at home and any one spoke of his patients. He had learned to love this bright, pretty girl, and feared she was not going to get well. I wonder how he could consent to come home at all while she was so sick," Agnes Van Dorn murmured to herself, as she sought her own room after leaving Bessie, the tears dropping fast as she went.

Tom had always been her idol; he was her only brother, and she was exceedingly proud of him and his brilliant attainments; and now to know that he had given all the best affection of his heart to another, even though she had also learned to love the girl he had chosen, caused her

a momentary pang; it seemed somehow as if he was slipping away from her, and dropping out of her world.

She was rather ashamed of these feelings, and of her tears, however, and stood a moment outside the door to wipe them away before she went into her mother's presence.

Mrs. Van Dorn looked up smilingly as she came in.

"In tears again, my daughter?" she said, gravely, as she noticed her emotion and downcast countenance.

"Do you know, mamma, Tom has just told me of his engagement?"

Mrs. Van Dorn laughed softly.

"Yes, dear, and it is to the—or one of the dearest little maidens in the world—just the bright, pure-hearted girl that Tom needs for a wife to keep him cheerful, and from getting moody and depressed over his patients, who seem to trouble him so."

"And have you known all about it since you came, mamma?" Agnes asked, reproachfully.

"Yes, dear; but Tom was not quite ready to tell it to any one else—he wished the little invalid to get a trifle stronger before subjecting her to the excitement of a formal introduction to her future relatives; indeed, he has not felt quite sure that she was going to live long enough to become anybody's wife, until within a few days. She has been improving rapidly during the past week, he tells me. Are you not pleased with her?"

Mrs. Van Dorn searched her daughter's face earnestly, as she asked this question.

"Yes, mamma, but——"

"But we do not quite like to give up our brother; or the idea that any one else has a stronger claim upon him than ourselves," interrupted the matron, playfully, and reading Agnes' heart like an open book.

"That is just it, mamma, and I know that it is horribly selfish in me; but Tom has always been my especial pride and paragon, you know."

"Not even excepting a certain colonel whom I have the

pleasure of knowing!" retorted Mrs. Van Dorn, with eyebrows raised in mock surprise.

"Well, of course, you know," Agnes began, rather incoherently, and then she burst out laughing, though the tears still stood in her eyes.

It *was* a *hard* thing to surrender this beloved brother even to dear little Bessie Lightwell, whom she had begun to love even before she dreamed of this.

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Van Dorn, with gentle gravity, "that I must soon give up both son and daughter to the dearer love of others, and it is not an easy matter for a mother to feel that she is no longer first in the affections of her children——"

"But, mamma, you do not suppose we are going to love you any the less for having formed these new ties?" Agnes cried with pained eagerness.

"No, love; nor will your brother love *you* any the less on account of the new tie he has so recently formed."

"You have the best of the argument, I must confess, dear mother, and I will not be foolish any more. I must say, too, that if I had been allowed to choose my own sister-in-law, I could not have been better pleased than I am with Tom's choice, unless he could have married Laura," Agnes said heartily.

Mrs. Van Dorn smiled slightly, and seemed about to make some reply, but thought better of it and let the matter rest as it was.

The invalid improved very rapidly after this.

She had dreaded exceedingly the revelation of her engagement to Doctor Van Dorn, being extremely sensitive regarding her feeble condition.

But with the ordeal once safely passed, and after the cordial reception which she had met from her lover's friends, all her apprehensions vanished.

In a few days she was able to ride, and very fair and lovely, too, she looked in the delicate mauve-colored robe with its handsome trimmings, which Agnes had selected

for her, and the dainty hat, with its pale rose garnishings, framing the clustering curls and giving a piquant look to her face that was positively bewitching.

After this a drive to the park became a daily occurrence, while each time she appeared to grow stronger; a lovely color came to her pale cheeks and a merry light began to dance in her great dark eyes.

The dreadful disease which had so long threatened her life was fast being conquered and put to rout, and as she felt the blood coursing naturally in her veins once more her natural vivacity returned to her.

Doctor Van Dorn watched her with the most jealous care. He would not allow her to become fatigued in the slightest degree; he would not tolerate anything like excitement for her, and no trouble was deemed too great if it would serve to shield her from all that was unpleasant or disagreeable or give her the least pleasure.

It was a pleasure to see him when he came into the presence of this bright, artless child—for she seemed scarcely more than that—drop the load of care which had oppressed him all day, and give himself up to the great and absorbing love.

It was happiness without alloy to him to hear her clear, glad laugh, with the ring of fast returning health in it—to listen as she parried his jests with quick, keen flashes of wit; and but for the sorrow and anxiety which Mrs. Van Dorn and Agnes felt for Laura, the lonely prisoner awaiting her trial—there would have been no cloud to mar their enjoyment or the delight they experienced in the society of this new daughter and sister.

CHAPTER XXIV

ELIOT HARCOURT'S ARREST

The crisis was passed, and Eliot Harcourt was slowly getting better. Doctor Van Dorn remained with him all

through that long night, which they thought would be his last, and when he at length aroused from the heavy stupor which for so many hours had benumbed his senses, with the light of reason in his eyes, and recognized the friend who had been so faithful and untiring, the strong man was obliged to make some excuse to leave him for a moment and go into an adjoining room to hide his emotion.

"Thank God—thank God, it will come right now!" he murmured, as the great tears gathered in his eyes and rolled over his bronzed cheeks.

"Laura?" was the first word that Eliot uttered, as he turned his eyes appealingly to his friend's when he returned to him.

"Laura is well, and has returned," Doctor Van Dorn told him, thinking the intelligence would set his mind at rest.

And it did. He was too weak at that moment to comprehend what her return meant, and with a sigh of relief, he turned upon his pillow and dropped into natural slumber.

To Laura this cheering news was like a message of encouragement from Heaven, and she began to brighten visibly immediately.

And yet it seemed cruel that she could send him no word, no token of love. She *knew* that he loved her, but she had learned it through a third party; *he* had never told her that his heart was hers, nor claimed that affection from her which belonged alone to him, and she could give him no sign of her devotion, nor the anxiety which had nearly broken her heart during his illness. His pride had sealed her lips.

But now he was improving.

"He will get well," she thought; "I shall see him again, I shall look into his eyes, and hear his voice, and that will be joy, even though the *worst* may come."

As Eliot gained strength his inquiries could not be

avoided, and Doctor Van Dorn was obliged to tell him of Laura's arrest and imprisonment.

He did not appear very much excited, for it was something that he knew must come sooner or later, but a lurid light sprang into his eyes, and his thin lips came together with an expression that foretold trouble for some one in the future for this trouble of hers.

One day, upon ascending the stairs leading to his patient's room, Doctor Van Dorn was confronted on the upper landing by a suspicious-looking individual, clad in a blue suit ornamented with brass buttons.

"How is the chap in yonder?" the man demanded abruptly.

The young physician's face grew dark at the question, and his cheeks lost something of their florid hue as he replied:

"Gaining slowly but surely."

"Able to see company?"

"No."

"How long before he'll be well enough?"

"Not for a week or more. What do you want?" the doctor asked with a frown.

"I've got a little document that I want to read to him," the man answered with a grin and tapping his breast-pocket significantly.

"You can't do it to-day," Doctor Van Dorn said sternly, "nor to-morrow, nor the next day. Any unusual excitement would throw him into a relapse immediately."

"Very well, doctor, I'll bide your time, if it ain't *too* long; but I've got to get my paw on that chap sooner or later, and so you'll not mind if I pace my beat out here until I've done it."

"In other words, you mean you have an order for Mr. Harcourt's arrest," Doctor Van Dorn said with repressed excitement and speaking in a low tone.

"Exactly."

"What is the indictment against him?" the young man asked thoughtfully.

"Complicity in that Waldron murder."

A bitter smile curled the young physician's lips. It seemed as if one trouble did but tread upon the heels of another.

"Very well, I have no wish to put any obstacle in the way of your duty, but you cannot come near my patient for three days at least, and in the meantime I will try and prepare him for what is to come. You can patrol this hall night and day if you see fit, but you are not to cross the threshold until I give you leave."

"All right, boss! them were my orders before coming here, so we'll call it settled till you tip me the wink that the time's up," returned the officer good-naturedly, as the doctor turned away to Eliot's room.

The third day following this conversation Eliot sat up for the first time, and he broke the intelligence to his friend, together with such other facts as he had been able to gather in the meantime as to why he was suspected as an accomplice in Laura's crime.

The officer was then allowed to serve his warrant, to which Eliot listened with a rather scornful smile, and with that same lurid light in his eyes that had been there when he heard of Laura's imprisonment.

He was to be allowed to remain where he was, with an officer stationed at his door, until he was strong enough to be present at the trial, which, on account of some new and startling evidence, could not now be conducted without him.

"How long will it take to prop me up sufficiently to go through with this ordeal?" he asked Doctor Van Dorn after the man had done his duty and retired.

"A couple of weeks, if you will behave yourself properly."

"I'll behave, I promise you; and the quicker it is all over with the better for every one of us; but, let Mrs.

Roxena Waldron beware! She shall suffer for the mischief that she has wrought."

"Don't get excited, old boy; it won't do you any good."

"I know it, and I'll wait until my turn comes before I vent my ire. But how are your other patients getting along, Tom? You have not told me a word about them."

"Finely; and, old fellow, I've made a conquest over that little one over yonder in more senses than one and am the happiest man alive," Doctor Van Dorn confessed.

Eliot gave him a look of surprise and then said:

"I'm glad of it, Tom; you deserve the best wife in the world. I wish you all joy, but——"

What he was intending to add was cut short by a heavy sigh and firmly compressed lips.

"None of that, Harcourt, or your 'couple of weeks' will be lengthened to four," the doctor said warningly; "and," he added with a sly glance, "you might just as well have finished with your sentence; you do not suppose that I could have taken care of you all these weeks—and you raving like a madman—and not learn something regarding your hopes and fears. Now let me tell you, El, you have *nothing* to fear; that little snowdrop behind the gratings yonder has been drooping during all your illness, and it only needed a few words from me the other morning to tell her that you were out of danger to make her as chipper as a spring robin."

"Nonsense!" muttered Eliot, gloomily.

"Well, if it is nonsense to you I can't help it; but when I told her that you'd pull through all right, she just grasped both of my hands with a look of gratitude that I shall never forget, and swallowed a great sob that made my own throat ache and then she turned away to hide the joy in her eyes; if you don't think those are propitious signs, I should like to know what are."

"Bah! doctor, don't try to prop me up with false hopes. What right has a poor, poverty-stricken devil to think of such things when he knows they are beyond his reach?"

"Poor folks like to be happy as well as the rich, and if you care anything for Laura Preston's future or your own either, I would advise you to improve your opportunities."

"What opportunities?" Eliot asked with a short laugh. "According to the papers the future does not look very promising to either of us."

"A fig for the papers; you know and I know very well that, with the evidence you have in your possession, this thing will all come out right in the end. But you have talked enough—don't speak another word; go to bed and to sleep—don't even think for the next two hours," with which injunction the doctor abruptly took his departure, thus leaving his patient alone.

He did not, however, follow the advice given him, but sat silent and depressed for a long time.

To him the future looked exceedingly dark.

When this trial terminated, even if he stood clear of the charge against him before the world, it would be with an almost empty purse and shattered health, for he knew that it would take him a long time to recover his former vigor and strength and be able to do battle for his living once more.

He loved Laura Preston with all the strength of his manly heart, and had a hope that his affection was returned, aside from the doctor's recent encouraging statements.

He could not forget how Laura had clung to him that last night before leaving the city, when he went to bid her "good-by"; he could not forget how her beautiful eyes had lingered on his face, nor how her hands had trembled in his parting clasp. It had required all the power of his strong will on that occasion to prevent him from telling her of his mighty love and begging for a ray of hope from her to brighten his future.

But he was fearfully proud. He belonged to a proud and willful race, and he would rather his tongue had be-

come paralyzed in his mouth than to have been guilty of asking the rich heiress to share his poverty; or, in other words, as he bitterly expressed it, begging her to share her inheritance with him.

He knew that she would gladly do it if she loved him; she would never stop to consider that she was raising him from a lower plane to her own level, but *he* could never forget it. He could never humble himself sufficiently to accept anything of the kind from the woman whom he loved. She must look up to him and respect him, feeling that she could rely upon him in any emergency—that he was able to take care of her instead of the reverse.

If she had been poor he would not have hesitated an instant; he would have won her and exulted in the winning, and then gone forth proud to struggle for a moderate income to share with her, and now, even if she should be cleared from this charge and they should both go free, he felt that this barrier must still exist; he *would not* go to her with empty hands, even though his heart was rich and full to overflowing.

"Poverty is a wretched curse," he muttered moodily, and then crept weakly to bed and tried to forget himself in sleep.

The next day when Doctor Van Dorn came to pay his regular visit, he was accompanied by an exceedingly queer-looking individual of perhaps sixty years of age.

He wore a shabby suit of butternut-brown, a tumbled and not immaculate shirt, a wilted collar, which was surmounted by an antediluvian stock. A pair of coarse cowhide boots encased his feet, and his tall, old-fashioned beaver was battered and worn. He had scarcely a hair upon his head, which shone as if it had been polished by some laborious process, and the green cotton umbrella and the shabby bag which he carried would neither of them have been considered ornaments to a person's outfit.

Eliot regarded the stranger with surprise, not unmixed

with amusement, for he appeared as awkward as he was old-fashioned.

"I have brought you a visitor," Doctor Van Dorn said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Eliot bowed courteously to the old gentleman, whose keen eyes were searching his face with a shrewd, comprehensive glance, and the young physician went on to explain:

"I found him standing on the corner just under your window, staring at a poster on which your own name figures somewhat largely—in other words, at a bulletin board, and he asked me if I knew where you could be found. I said 'yes,' and he insisted upon coming to see you at once, as he is or was an old friend of your mother's."

"Indeed," said Eliot, surprised, and bestowing a rather more interested look upon the stranger.

"Yes, yes," the man returned, with a succession of bobs with his shining head; "but they've got you in a tight place, hain't they, youngster?"

"Excuse me," Eliot replied, with a trifle of hauteur, "you said, I believe, that you were an old friend of my mother's. I do not remember of having ever met you before."

The old man chuckled and began walking nonchalantly about the room, examining the pictures and *bric-a-brac,* punching first a chair cushion, then a hassock, and lastly the bed with the point of his umbrella, much to the invalid's annoyance, not to say disgust.

"Perhaps not, perhaps not," he answered, while his little, round black eyes twinkled cunningly, "but *I* have not a *faint* recollection of a very cross baby, with a very red face and a very naked head," rubbing his own suggestively, "*not* the most attractive infant imaginable, notwithstanding his doting mother thought him to be the perfection of all that was beautiful. I can't say you've improved very much in appearance, though you're white-liv-

ered enough now; had a tough time of it, eh?" and he eyed sharply Eliot's wan face.

"Yes, I have been very ill. You were acquainted with my parents, then," Eliot remarked, not knowing what else to say.

"Well, *slightly*. Emeline Randal, who married Alex. Harcourt, used to think that Uncle Job Temple was about right in most things."

"Are you Uncle Job Temple?" Eliot asked, his face lighting up with pleasure.

"That's my name, youngster, though I'm not much of an uncle or kin to you. I came near getting into the family once a *leetle* nigher, but—that was one of the bubbles that burst. But it didn't make any difference to Emeline; she was a little woman that was worth her weight in gold."

"I have heard my mother speak of you many times, and I know well she loved Uncle Job Temple, as she always called you, but who, she told me, went to Africa before I was old enough to remember much about you. I am glad to see you, sir," and Eliot held out one weak white hand to the stranger, the annoyance all gone out of his face, and only pleasure and welcome shining in his eyes.

"That's the talk, young man—you look like your mother when you smile, and Emeline's smile wasn't an unpleasant thing to see, either," Mr. Temple answered, clasping the young man's hand, and shaking it in a somewhat doubtful manner, as if he feared it was liable to unhinge and come off in his grasp.

CHAPTER XXV

A TRUE FRIEND

Doctor Van Dorn went out from his friend's room laughing quietly to himself over the strange character

which he had picked up, and the new-comer was left alone with Eliot.

"Won't you have a chair, Uncle Job?" he asked, adopting the title which he had been accustomed to hear his mother use.

"I ain't one of the settin' kind. I like to be stirrin' about," he replied to the invitation, and with an indifferent and rather scornful glance at the richly upholstered chair which Eliot had indicated.

"But," the young man began with some embarrassment, "my head and nerves are still very weak, and—the squeak in your boots isn't very musical."

"Bless my soul! bless my soul! why didn't you say so before?" cried the old man, whereupon he plunged himself into the nearest chair, while he regarded the pair of coarse, stout boots upon his feet with a remorseful expression, that was, to say the least, comical.

Eliot smiled with amusement; but he remembered hearing his mother speak of the man's eccentricities, while at heart he was one of the best creatures alive.

"Light in the upper story, are you? What's been the matter?" he asked, regarding Eliot seriously.

"Brain fever."

"Whew! that's bad. Been sick long?"

"Several weeks."

"Poor boy," was the sympathetic rejoinder to this, "you've needed your mother, and Emeline was a nurse that knew a thing or two, too; I remember how she pulled John Hixon, your step-grandfather's brother, through a run of fever, when everybody else thought sure he'd go under. He owed his life to her, and couldn't say enough in praise of her. But poor Emeline's gone with all the rest," and his voice softened to tones of real tenderness as he said it.

"I've been down to the old place," he added, after a moment, and hastily brushing a tear from his eye. "I

didn't expect to find it shut up; it looked desolate and neglected."

"Yes," Eliot said, with a heavy sigh, "and I am sorry it has to be so, but it cannot be helped. Mother was left in reduced circumstances when my father died, and was obliged to put a mortgage on the place in order to get along and give me an education. Since then it has been about all I could do to keep the interest paid up, and support myself, though I would be glad to make improvements there."

"Why don't you sell it?" curtly asked the old gentleman, with his little sharp eyes fixed keenly on Eliot's face.

"Sell the old homestead!" he said quickly, a flush mounting to his forehead; "the home where my father and mother lived for so many years, and were so happy! I could not think of such a thing, Uncle Job, as long as I am able to earn a dollar."

"Humph!" reflectively grunted Mr. Temple, but there was a gratified expression on his face, which betrayed that his companion's reply had pleased him.

"What do you do for a living?" he asked, after a moment of silence.

"I am an artist."

Mr. Temple pursed up his lips at this, but remarked philosophically:

"Well, I s'pose people must have pictures and gimcracks, and I don't know but the business is all right if it only fetches in the tin."

Eliot colored again.

Precious little "tin" or any other kind of ore had his profession brought him of late, and the reflection was by no means a comforting one to him.

"You're single-handed as yet, I take it," was his visitor's next remark, and with an inquiring glance about the room.

Eliot regarded him with a look of perplexity.

"I beg pardon, I did not understand you," he said.

"Hain't made a fool of yourself and got married, I

mean," explained his companion somewhat gruffly, as if marriage was a state to be shunned and despised by everybody.

"Oh, no, indeed!" answered the young man, with a laugh, which, however, had a ring of bitterness in it and which did not escape the keen ears of his listener, "what could I do with a wife when it is close work for me to support myself and keep up the interest on that mortgage?"

"Perhaps you'd like a wife, though, if everything was all right?" Mr. Temple said, with a twinkle in his eyes. Then he added, more soberly, while he watched closely every expression on Eliot's face:

"But if you're hard pressed for money—you've been sick so long—I could let you have a trifle to help you out, say twenty-five or thirty dollars; I'm a *little mite* ahead in the world."

"Thank you," the artist replied, struggling to keep his lips from twitching, "but it is against my principles to borrow or get in debt in any way. Let me be well and strong once more, and I'll begin the battle anew, and 'paddle my own canoe.'"

"You've got Emeline's spirit over again; *she* was one of your energetic, persevering women, who wouldn't give up to anything, if she once undertook a job, and you'll come out right side up if you've got that kind of grit in you," Mr. Temple remarked approvingly, his own lips twitching slightly. "But about this scrape you're in," he continued, "what are you going to do about it?"

"Face the music, tell the truth, and take the consequences," Eliot answered indifferently, and as if he had not much to fear from the "scrape" referred to.

"That's the kind," said the old man heartily. "But what's it all about? It looks like a bad job, according to my way of thinking. I hope you've got good counsel."

"I have none as yet; have not been able to attend to it."

"None! That won't do. Tell me who's the best lawyer

in the city and I'll have him here for you in a jiffy!" And Uncle Job started to his feet and grabbed his hat and umbrella, as if there was not a moment to be lost.

Eliot laughed outright.

It was impossible for him not to be amused at the comical anxiety he betrayed.

"There is no need," he began.

"No need! I should think if you are accused as the accomplice of this gal, whoever she is, there was need of *something* being done," Mr. Temple said sharply, and not allowing him to finish his sentence.

"But Miss Preston, the young lady who has been accused of this crime, has the very best of counsel. I know some facts about this matter that cannot fail to go far toward clearing her, but I have been too ill to do anything about the affair, or even to see any one regarding it. But I give myself no uneasiness beyond the fact that she is suffering imprisonment, and the scandal that has arisen in consequence of it."

"How do *you* happen to be mixed up in it? And who is this Miss—Miss Preston, anyway?"

Mr. Temple's keen ears had caught the tender intonation of Eliot's voice as he uttered Laura's name, and his sharp eyes had noted the faint flush that arose to his cheek while speaking of her.

"She is a niece of Mr. Waldron's—Aunt Roxy's mother's step-sister's husband, if you can comprehend that rather mixed statement," Eliot answered, laughing.

"Sartin. I—your Aunt Roxy was—is Roxena Eliza Hixon here in New York?"

Mr. Temple appeared somewhat confused just now, and he, too, grew very red in the face as he asked this question.

"Yes. I forgot that you must know her."

"*Know* her! I reckon I have reason to remember something about her," Mr. Temple remarked dryly, adding:

"If Emeline was noted for her energy and perseverance, Roxena was no less so for her shrewdness, and—

well, to be *moderate,* I'll call it *calculation.* You find her a pretty *keen* kind of a woman, don't you?" he asked sharply.

"Yes; I think Mrs. Waldron is not lacking in ability," Eliot said coldly.

"Then this Miss Preston is a relative of William Waldron's, you say? Come, I want to know all about this affair. I may as well tell you that I am only a few weeks from the East, and when I found that Emeline and all the folks yonder were gone I made up my mind to hunt you up and see what kind of a chap you were. I'm a lonely old fellow, and I thought for the sake of the goodwill that your mother bore me you might perhaps give me a welcome and let me share your crust, if you had one, until I could look about a little for a place to settle in."

It would be difficult to describe the piercing look which the old man fixed upon the invalid's face as he said this.

A kindly gleam shone in the eyes which Eliot raised to him as he said, heartily and with a smile:

"I am glad you found me, Uncle Job, and I reckon that I have something rather better than a crust to share with you, if I haven't yet made my fortune. But about this trouble in which you find me, and which you are so kind as to feel interested in for me, draw your chair a little nearer, for there are some things that I do not wish the curious to know about just yet, and I will tell you the circumstances."

And Eliot related the facts of Trixy's sickness and death, the suspicious evidence which Mrs. Waldron claimed to have discovered, her persecution of Laura and her flight upon the very day that he, too, left the city. He spoke of her arrest and the circumstances attending it, which he had learned from Doctor Van Dorn, but he did not mention the discovery he had made in Trixy's room on the night preceding his departure from New York. That he was reserving for the day of the trial, hoping that it might

prove a *coup de maitre* in Laura's case, and go far toward bringing the really guilty party to justice.

"Well! well! well!" Mr. Temple said, with a doubtful shake of his shiny head. "I am afraid there is rather a bad look for the poor girl; and because you had favored her and went away on the same day that she disappeared, they take it for granted that you, too, are concerned in it —is that the way you reason it?"

"Yes," Eliot answered, with averted eyes.

"Um!" ejaculated his interrogator, nothing escaping his notice. "You say the uncle who left this property willed that it should all go to one if the other died. Who was to have it in case *she* died, too?"

"Aunt Roxy's sons, William and Fred."

"Yes, yes; I see. One is dead, and if the other is hung——"

"Uncle Job! don't—*please!*" Eliot cried, with white lips and writhing as under a blow.

"Bless my soul! bless my soul! What *did* I say?" exclaimed the little old man, springing to his feet excitedly, and beginning to walk nervously up and down the room again, and casting remorseful glances at the young man, who was white to ghastliness.

"There! I've begun that thundering noise again," he said, stopping short in the middle of the floor, as his thick boots squeaked unmercifully upon the awkward silence that followed his unfortunate speech; whereupon, with a savage frown, he dexterously slipped the offending articles from his feet, and Eliot was amazed to behold them incased in a pair of the *finest of silken hose.*

"I must let off steam somehow," Mr. Temple resumed nervously, as he wiped the perspiration from his red face and recommenced his pacings. "I did not mean anything as bad as that, my boy; the word came out before I thought, and of course it will all come out right; but, mark my word, you'll find that Roxena Eliza Hixon has had more to do with it than appears on the surface. *I*

know her of old, and she can turn her hand to almost anything to gain a point or a penny. But, Eliot, my lad, you're true blue—you're worthy to be Emeline's son, as you have shown by not turning the cold shoulder upon a rusty-looking old codger like me; and now I'll tell you I am going to stay by and see this thing fought out. I'll beat that woman if it takes the last 'red' in my pocket, and so, young man, if you need a *few thousands* for lawyer's fees, just say the word, for I'm the party that can supply them."

He stopped before Eliot to see how he would take this information.

The young man glanced up into his face with a look of surprise, and then his eyes dropped again to those silk stockings. Was the man playing a part?

Mr. Temple's glance followed his, and after a grimace of chagrin, he chuckled softly to himself.

"I'm beat if I did not forget that I had them on! And they *don't* exactly correspond with them shabby canal-boats over yonder; and I've had a tough time managing the clumsy things, too," with a glance at the well worn boots that he had discarded. "But, to tell you the truth, boy, I didn't want you to 'love me for my loaves,' and so I stepped into this rig just to see how you'd receive me. It's many a year since I've worn butternut-brown, but I've seen the time when I was glad to get as shabby a suit of clothes as this, and a pair of cowhide boots, too; and I didn't wear silk stockings inside, either," he concluded, with a jolly laugh.

Eliot began to see through the little ruse that had been played upon him, and he colored again; but inwardly he was glad that the eccentric old man had come to him just as he had.

"I'm a lone old man, a lone old man," he went on, as his young relative did not reply. "I never married, I thank the Lord I didn't, too!" he added, with some asperity; "but when a body gets to be over sixty, he begins to

wish he had some one in the world who had a little interest in him, and if you'll let me, I'll stay by you until this trouble is over. Roxeny Hixon shan't beat you if I can help it. I guess I can, for I can fight to the tune of *one* hundred thousand dollars, and"—sticking his tongue into his cheek, and squinting up one eye knowingly—"*maybe a leetle more.* Say, shall we cast in our lots together, youngster?"

Eliot's eye grew moist, in spite of his manhood, at this speech, which was both appealing and protective. He was glad to see his mother's relative and friend, would have been just as glad had he continued to play the part of a shabby old farmer, with apparently not a surplus dollar in his pocket; but to discover him such a host in himself, and so willing and eager to co-operate with him and assist him through the impending trouble, touched him in a tender spot.

But one thing puzzled him.

He could not quite understand his frequent and acrimonious allusions to Mrs. Waldron, and found himself wondering what could have occurred in the past to set him so against her.

"You are very kind, Uncle Job," he said, heartily. "It will be a great comfort to have so stanch a friend to stand by me, and I appreciate your goodness. I hope, though, that you feel quite sure that you would have been just as sincerely welcomed, as my dear mother's friend, if you had not told me of your prosperity. I am truly glad, however, that the world has used you so well, and I am sure you deserve it."

"Tut, tut, boy; I've got my share of faults as well as the rest of humanity; but I know you are tired, and I'll leave you alone for a little while. This is a hotel, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll go and see if I can get a room and a bit of something to eat, for I'm both tired and hungry; besides," with a humorous twinkle of his keen eyes, "I don't feel

quite natural in this kind of a rig. I'll show you something a little more civilized to-morrow."

He resumed his coarse boots, gathered up his shabby valise and the faded umbrella, which looked as if it might have done service for his ancient namesake, or even as far back as the time of the flood, and departed, while Eliot settled back in his chair, weary indeed from the prolonged interview, but with a sense of relief and satisfaction and cheerfulness such as he had not experienced for many a month.

He had found a true friend and a link which had once belonged to the happy past—a friend of his mother's, whose tender memories of her touched a chord in his heart, making it vibrate with something very like love for the strange old man himself.

CHAPTER XXVI

"WE'LL BEAT 'EM!"

When next Mr. Job Temple presented himself before Eliot he was an entirely different looking individual. He was clad in a modern suit of finest cloth and neat fit. An immaculate shirt-bosom shone beneath his stylish vest and coat, and upon it blazed a fine diamond of purest water, beautifully set, while a pair of costly buttons fastened his cuffs at the wrist. He was smoothly shaven, too, and looked the prosperous gentleman from the top of his shiny bald head to the tip of his polished, shapely boots, which, it was noticeable, *did not squeak* as he walked. His manner, too, was somewhat subdued and more refined, though he was naturally blunt and outspoken.

Eliot could not quite conceal his surprise and satisfaction at this remarkable change, which the little old man observed with an inward chuckle and a merry twinkle of his small eyes.

"Better to-day?" he asked in his abrupt way, as he took a seat opposite the young man.

"Much better, I thank you," he answered, smiling.

"Glad to hear it, for I've got considerable talking to do," responded Mr. Temple gravely.

"I've been looking into this case of yours since I saw you yesterday," he continued, after a thoughtful pause, "and I find that you did not make quite a clean breast of it to me. Now, my boy, I don't believe in any half way work, so we'll start square, if you please, that is if you can trust Job Temple, and I reckon you may safely do so, for he never went back on anybody yet. I want to know just how much of a hand you had in this deal, what weapons you've got to fight with, and how much advantage the enemy has over you to begin with, then we'll intrench ourselves behind our own fortifications and fight that female porcupine until she hasn't a quill left to throw at us."

Eliot laughed at this reference to Mrs. Waldron, and found himself again wondering why his ancient friend was so bitter toward her.

He bent his head in thought for a few moments, after which he looked up, frankly meeting those keen eyes that were fixed upon him, and said:

"Draw your chair closer, Uncle Job, so that no one can hear, and I *will* make a 'clean breast,' as you call it, of the matter."

"That's the talk. I know you were not telling me nigh all there was to tell yesterday. I'm sixty-two, but I've got my eye-teeth, though I didn't cut 'em till late in life, and it was mighty hard on me when they did come, though, as I'll explain to you some other time, but they're sharp yet, so empty yourself, youngster, and let me get to the bottom as soon as possible," and Mr. Temple drew his chair up under Eliot's nose, settled himself with his elbows on his knees, his chin on his hands, and prepared to listen to the young man's story.

And Eliot did make a clean breast of it, feeling assured

that he could trust him, and that he was competent to render him most efficient help, and Laura, also, in the perplexing difficulties by which they were surrounded.

Toward the last Mr. Temple became somewhat excited, and his face shone with triumph.

"We'll beat 'em," he said, with a chuckle, "and I begin to think you are a keen one, after all. I'll never say a word against artists again, though I must confess I've always considered 'em a useless set, and their gimcracks nothing but trash. Now I'm off to see that lawyer of Miss Preston's, and to try to get a glimpse of the girl herself. What is she like? One of your high and mighty ones, that can't be reached by a forty-foot ladder, or quiet and sensible like? It's plain to be seen *you're* quite *fond* of her."

Eliot flushed at this, but answered smilingly:

"I think you will find Miss Preston a lady in every sense of the word, but you understand that she is not to know anything of the facts which I have related to you to-day. They will all have to come out at the trial, but you know something unforeseen may happen before that, and I think it best not to let our evidence be known much until the time. Give her all the encouragement that you see fit aside from that, but we don't wish to raise any false hopes."

"I understand; you trust your uncle to keep a close mouth when the occasion requires," returned Mr. Temple. Whereupon he took his departure.

He first went to Laura's lawyer, and had a long interview with him, after which he repaired to the jail where she was confined, to make her acquaintance, and judge for himself as to the merits of the girl, whom he could plainly see that Eliot loved devotedly.

Here he was shown into a visiting room, as he was told that other visitors were just then with Miss Preston.

As he entered he noticed at the farther end of the room a woman clad in deepest mourning.

She was sitting by the window, in a listless attitude, and gazing into the street below.

It was Mrs. Waldron.

It has been said that she did not go to see Laura, and she had resolved that she would not go to her at all.

She could not bear the thought of facing the girl whom she had so wronged, and whom she was so vindictively pursuing to her ruin, but of late almost every one she met inquired of her concerning her niece, how she bore her imprisonment, how she looked, what she said and did, and taking it for granted that she would visit the girl who had been a member of her family for so many years, that she began to feel very uncomfortable, and to fear that her neglect might be unpleasantly commented upon.

So to-day she had braced up her courage for an interview, although she mentally resolved that it should be a very short one; but she also was obliged to wait, having arrived only a few minutes before Mr. Temple, and thus it transpired that these two, who had known each other earlier in life, met for the first time after many years.

"Ugh!" ejaculated Mr. Temple, as he dropped wearily into a chair and removed his hat.

The day was warm, and the energetic little man had not spared himself as he went to and fro intent upon this unpleasant business.

Mrs. Waldron turned her stately head to glance at the vulgar person who had been thus demonstrative.

All that her indifferent stare revealed to her for the moment was a diminutive individual, having a shiny bald head, and a very red face, which he was industriously mopping with his handkerchief.

"Whew! rather warm for the season," Mr. Temple next remarked in an aside, and began vigorously fanning himself with his handkerchief.

Not finding his seat a comfortable one, he arose, and turned to look at a picture which hung on the wall at his

right; and now Mrs. Waldron's critical eye showed her that her companion was not quite such a boor as she had at first taken him to be.

She remarked the fine, nicely fitting apparel, the handsome, stylish beaver which he held in one hand, and the sparkling diamond upon his spotless shirt-front.

As if conscious of her scrutiny, Mr. Temple glanced over at her.

As their eyes met for an instant he started, sat down again, then nervously arose a second time, twirled his hat with something of embarrassment, and finally began to pace up and down the room.

At this time Mrs. Waldron turned to the window again and fixed her attention once more upon the passers-by in the street.

But the man's movements annoyed her.

Every time he turned in his walk he came a little nearer to her, and she was conscious that his keen eyes were fixed upon her with a penetrating look.

She shrugged her shoulders impatiently, arose, turned a trifle, so that she could observe him more closely.

Something in his air and manner now attracted her. His back was toward her, but as he wheeled about at the other end of the room their eyes met again.

She started now, gave a little surprised gasp, took a step forward, hesitated, and then stood still, all the blood in her veins seeming to concentrate in her face for the moment.

Mr. Temple chuckled.

"Ahem! I see you haven't quite forgotten me, Roxeny," he said dryly, and with his broadest accent, as he came forward and stood directly in front of her.

"Job Temple!" she gasped, the blood now flying back to her heart and leaving her deathly pale.

"At your service, Roxeny; hope to see you well. It's a good many years since you and I crossed each other's path."

"I am well, thank you," she said, ignoring the latter part of his speech. "I hope you are well also," she added, as her eyes drooped uneasily before his glance.

"I've never seen a sick day since that afternoon you told me I could quit; *that* was rather a calker, I own, but a man can weather almost any kind of a gale if he only has *grit* enough," Mr. Temple said, with the utmost coolness, though his glance never left her face.

"Have you been in New York long?" Mrs. Waldron asked politely, and apparently unheeding his allusion to the past.

"A couple of days or so; I've only just returned from the other side of the world, where I went to seek my fortune, as perhaps you know."

"Indeed! I trust you have been successful," the lady remarked, with some show of interest.

"Well, reasonably so; though when once a man, or woman either, for that matter"—with a shrewd look at her—"gets the fever of gold, there is no telling how high nor how long it may run. I guess *I'm* satisfied, however; I've made quite a respectable pile, enough to carry me through handsomely and something to spare."

Mrs. Waldron started, and her eyes glittered at this intelligence.

It might have been the reflection of that diamond, upon which they appeared to be resting just then.

"How fortunate! You were always very persevering, Job," she said suavely, her voice softening unconsciously (?) at the last word.

"Yes," he answered, reflectively, and with something of emphasis, "it was always against my nature to give up anything that I once undertook, and I believe I never made but one dead failure in all my life."

"I am glad to know that you have been so successful. Did your family return with you?"

"Yes, every one of 'em," he returned, with a chuckle;

then he added: "Roxeny, I came back just as I went away, all alone."

Again the color flew to her face.

"Have you been to —— since your return?" she asked.

"Yes, I went directly there; of course, I didn't look for many old landmarks, but I did hope to find Emeline there," he returned, sadly.

"Poor Emeline died more than six years ago," Mrs. Waldron said, with a slight shiver.

"Did you find the old place much changed?" she asked, a moment later.

"No, things were looking somewhat neglected, but pretty much the same as in the old days."

"Those were pleasant days, Job," Mrs. Waldron remarked, a suspicious tremble in her voice.

"Well, people usually think their youthful days the pleasantest part of their lives, but I must confess that I feel pretty well content with things just as they are, yes, pretty well content," he answered, with a thoughtful nod of his bald head, and looking straight into her eyes.

"Have you no regrets, then? Are they all dead?" she demanded, with some asperity.

"Well, Roxy, ahem!—I think it's just as well not to meddle with bygones. As for regrets, I don't know. The set-back that you gave me in them days nigh about shook me to pieces for awhile, but where regrets are useless, it's just as well not to indulge in them. So I made up my mind to put the best foot forward, and as 'twas money that made the man, in your opinion, rather than a strong, true, brave heart, I vowed I would show you that Job Temple was as capable as any other of winning a fortune. I've done it, Roxy, I am worth a good round million to-day, but I've not a chick nor a child of my own to leave it to when I'm gone; I suppose that, at least, might be thought a subject for regret."

"I see that you have never forgiven me for the past," Mrs. Waldron said sadly and with averted eyes, "and you

know well enough that it was the *force of circumstances* alone that drove me to do what I did."

"The force of ambition and avarice rather, Roxy," Mr. Temple said tersely, though there was a gleam in his eyes that betrayed he was somewhat excited by recalling these memories.

"And you will not believe even yet what I told you on that last day?" she asked reproachfully.

"You told me quite a number of things, if I remember correctly," Mr. Temple said dryly.

"Yes, I told you that at heart I was all right," Mrs. Waldron said earnestly, "that though I felt obliged, on account of my duties to others, to give you up and accept Mr. Waldron's offer, that my heart was still yours, and—and always would be," the widow concluded, burying her face in her handkerchief and quietly weeping.

Mr. Temple's lips twitched. Whether from pain or some other emotion it would be difficult to say.

"Yes, Roxeny, I remember. I have not forgotten a word nor an incident of that last interview; it was branded upon my mind so deep that I do not think I could ever forget it if I should live to be a thousand years old. I was rather green then—a verdant countryman, if I *was* ten years older than you; but no truer heart ever beat in the breast of any living man, and I had loved you ever since you were a little girl. I'm an old fool, perhaps, for going over it all at this late day, but you have driven me to it," he said, flushing and speaking half-angrily.

"You know," he resumed, "that I was the last of four boys and my parents' sole dependence, and I had to stay with them as long as they lived. Then the farm had to be sold to pay the debts, and it was rather late in the day for a fellow to begin life for himself. But when I came to you and told you how I loved you and would work for you, you bade me hope, and told me that you would wait until I could win a home for you. We had been engaged for four years—do you remember?—and I had worked

day and night to get my farm paid for and a little something ahead to furnish the house in a tasty kind of way, for I knew you loved pretty things and I liked to see them about you.

"But that day—I waited a week for your birthday to come around, that I might give you a pleasant surprise—when I came to you and told you that the last dollar was paid on the place, that the farm was clear and we need not wait any longer, have you forgotten how you coldly told me you 'had changed your mind,' and asked me to let you go free?

"A man don't often get a set-back like the one you gave me that day, Roxy; it was like blotting a sun instantly out of a clear sky; but when I found out the reason of it—that a city gallant had been making up to you, and had tempted you from me with his thousand dollars a year and the prospect of a city life—it turned me for a time from a man into a *devil*. You *tried* to make me think that it was because you could help your folks better—they were poor; you *said* you were true to me at heart, but I knew you lied. You were dazzled by that paltry thousand and by the young, spruce-looking chap from the city; you were false and treacherous, and *you* were accountable for the wreck that you made of me for the time. You had given yourself to me; I had spent all my energies for you for four of the best years of my life, and you knew that I would gladly have labored on for you and yours that they should never lack for a home while I lived.

"I told you all this. Do you remember how I pleaded and begged for you not to blot out the light from my life? Yes, I see that you have not forgotten; but you turned a deaf ear, and on the very day that I had hoped to take you to Hopedale—*you* know why I called it that—you went away to the city with the man who had won you from me. You wanted money, finery and position, but, Roxey, I begin to think I've got a leetle the best of you in the race after gold, after all," he concluded, with a shrug of his shoulders,

and striving to conquer the excitement which for the time had taken possession of him.

"Oh, Job! don't triumph over me; I've had enough to endure of late without that," Mrs. Waldron cried out in a voice sharp with pain.

"Not at all, not at all; it is only over myself that I have triumphed in conquering my weakness, and coming out right side up with plenty of ballast for the future," he answered coolly, adding:

"But I told you that it wasn't best to meddle with bygones, so we'll drop them for good and all. I suppose the world has used you pretty well," he remarked, as he ran his eye over her rich garments.

"Pretty well of late, although I am very lonely," she replied with a sigh. "I have lately fallen heir to considerable property from Uncle John Hixon, father's eldest brother."

"What! I thought John Hixon had children of his own!" Job Temple cried, astonished.

"He had, but both are dead."

"And he left everything to you?"

"Everything *fell* to me, as I was his only living relative."

"That is strange," Mr. Temple said, with a puzzled look.

"Why should it be strange?" Mrs. Waldron asked, with a startled glance at her companion.

"Because, after you left home John Hixon came to make your father a visit and had a terrible sickness while there. Emeline nursed him through it as if she had been his own daughter, and I heard him tell your father that he should go home and put a codicil to his will and leave her something handsome."

"There was no will to be found after his death," Mrs. Waldron said, with her eyes fixed upon the carpet, and Job Temple, who was watching her intently, and whom nothing escaped, saw that her lips trembled slightly as she spoke.

"There *was* a will, and she's been up to more deviltry," was his mental comment, but he said aloud:

"I suppose he left a good round sum; John Hixon was accounted well off before I left the country."

"It seems small compared with your round million," Mrs. Waldron said with a forced smile; "it amounts to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"Half of which, without doubt, belongs to Emeline's son," was Mr. Job Temple's inward comment number two.

"Aha! then that makes you quite comfortable, Roxeny," he said. Mrs. Roxena did *not look "comfortable,"* whatever her feelings may have been.

"How about this Miss Preston, over whom the whole city is ringing? She's a niece of yours, I'm told," he continued, abruptly changing the subject.

"Of my husband's," corrected Mrs. Waldron, with a sigh, as if even that remote relationship was to be regretted.

"She's quite an heiress, I hear; has lots of money."

"Yes."

"Left her by your husband's brother?"

The lady bowed assent. It was an obnoxious topic.

"Who gets the property if she should be hung?"

Mrs. Waldron shuddered.

Almost everybody asked her that question now, and it haunted her like a nightmare.

"I suppose it would come into my family in that case. But I hope you do not think I stop to consider that while the poor girl is in such trouble," she said, uneasily.

"Of course not. You must be very much attached to her, seeing she lived with you for so many years. It was rather queer that she should run away from you. You see, I know some of the circumstances. I hunted up Emeline's son when I came here, and he has told me about it; and it seems that he is mixed up in the affair, too."

"Yes, some evidence has recently come to light which people think points to him as an accomplice."

"Do *you* believe him to be guilty of any wrong?" Mr. Temple asked, searchingly.

"I did not until that *horrible discovery* was made. Of course, since then I am obliged to believe he is concerned in some wrong," Mrs. Waldron returned, shuddering.

"I know, I know," her companion said hastily. "It does have rather a bad look, but I've no more idea that he has been guilty of crime than that I murdered that innocent girl myself, and I'm going to stand by him, Roxy, till the last gun is fired. I've got plenty of money—money's a mighty power in the world—and I'll spend my last dollar before Emeline's son shall go to the gallows or even to prison."

The conversation was here cut short by the appearance of the jailer, who announced that the visitor for Miss Preston could now see her, and both Mrs. Waldron and Mr. Temple arose.

"Were *you* going to see *her?*" the former asked.

"Yes, I've a bit of news to cheer her, but I'll wait with pleasure till you have been," Mr. Temple returned politely, and stood aside to let her pass.

Mrs. Waldron grew pale.

News to cheer Laura! It did not sound pleasantly to her ears, and her heart sank heavily.

"No, no," she said nervously, "I do not feel very well; I'll come some other day," and without giving him time to reply she swept from the room the most miserable woman in New York city at that moment.

CHAPTER XXVII

PUZZLING QUESTIONS

Mrs. Roxena had been unexpectedly and most unpleasantly confronted by the shadowy past, and perhaps a little explanation regarding that past is necessary just here.

She was the only child of a man named Eldred Hixon. Her mother had died when she was quite young, and for several years she was left without guidance, growing up wild and wayward under the inefficient care of the one servant employed in the family.

Then Mr. Hixon had married again—a widow lady, also having one daughter, who was afterwards Eliot Harcourt's mother—and Job Temple was a younger brother of this Mrs. Hixon.

Two years later Mr. Hixon's second wife died, and the two girls took charge of the household affairs, until Emeline was married and made a home for herself, or rather went to the old Harcourt homestead to live with her husband.

Two happy years were passed here, and then death took her dear one, leaving her with a heavily mortgaged homestead, and her little son not quite a year old.

Meantime, Roxena Hixon, who was twenty-three years of age, became engaged to Job Temple, who was just ten years her senior.

She had known of his attachment for years, and as no rival had ever appeared, she had grown to believe that she loved her true, large-hearted, though homely and unpretending man, and promised to become his wife just as soon as he could provide a home for her.

During the last year of Roxena's engagement Mrs. Harcourt had persuaded her step-father to give up his own place and come to take charge of her estate and make his home there; and it was while living here that Roxena met, at one of their neighbors', Mr. William Waldron.

Job Temple had, as he said, put four of the best years of his life into the task of winning a home for the girl whom he loved, and when, at the last moment, he discovered that she had played him false, the knowledge nearly cost him his reason. Even after he knew it was too late, he had gone to her, pleading and praying that she would be true to him, and restore to him the love that rightly

belonged to him; he would yet win her a competency; she should lack for nothing, every wish should be gratified if she would only be his wife, and not take from him the only real joy he had ever known, the hope of a home, a fond and loving wife, and little ones growing up around him by and by.

But it was of no use. She was false at heart, and the temptation that had fallen in her way proved too much for her.

Mr. William Waldron was a dashing city gentleman, with a salary of a thousand dollars a year—double the ready money that Job would realize from his farm in the same length of time—and the prospects of having the handling of that, and of living in the busy town, dazzled the country-bred girl, and so she forsook her faithful, hard-working lover, and became the wife of the city clerk.

She had never seen Job from that day to this.

She knew that he had sold his farm within a short time, and then left his native town; but she did not like to make inquiries concerning him, and no one ever spoke of him to her, and thus she had known nothing of him during all the intervening years.

When she had first recognized him to-day in the waiting-room of the jail, she had nearly lost her self-possession, thorough woman of the world though she was.

And when he had spoken of his success, and told her that he had become a millionaire, a wild desire took possession of her to renew their old relations, even at this late day of their lives.

But neither his manner nor language gave her much encouragement to hope for this; while the veiled threat which he had thrown at her, by proclaiming himself Eliot's and Laura's champion, filled her with alarm. A million, a good round million! more money than she had ever dreamed he could possess, this old-time, little, insignificant lover of hers, this man who had toiled four

long years for a miserable little farm, which a thousandth part of his possessions would pay for now!

And she had lost it all through her own willful folly.

Her vanity, ambition, and avarice had overreached themselves, and now, all too late, she realized, with exceeding bitterness of soul, her fatal mistake.

How coolly he had spoken of "triumphing over himself in conquering his weakness" for her! with what assurance he spoke of his wealth, and his ability to do for Eliot and Laura! and she found herself tortured again and again, wondering what could have been the good news he had to take to the latter. The hours that she spent between this unexpected interview and the trial were not pleasant ones to remember afterward.

We must now go back a couple of weeks and ascertain the cause for Eliot Harcourt's arrest, and what the evidence, the "horrible discovery," was, that had "recently come to light," of which Mrs. Waldron had spoken, and that pointed to him as an accomplice in the "Waldron murder."

It has been stated that the key to the Waldron tomb was lost, and that there was considerable delay in procuring another, in order that an examination of the body of the young girl, who had died so suddenly and mysteriously, might be made.

But one morning Mrs. Waldron's lawyer called upon her, to tell her that another key had at length been procured, and that that afternoon had been appointed for the examination of the body.

This he had done, because, strange as it may appear, Mrs. Waldron had insisted upon being present when the casket was opened.

Every effort had been made to persuade her from this, but without avail; it was her own dead, she said, poor Trixy could not harm her now, and she had a right to be

present if she chose; she did choose, and forbade anything to be done unless she was notified previously.

Of course, the law had this matter in charge now, and it was not obligatory, but out of deference to Mrs. Waldron's feelings, she was allowed to do as she liked in the matter.

Why she was so set upon it was a mystery to all who knew about it, but afterward it all became clear as day.

"I wish I could persuade you to remain at home," the lawyer urged. "I do not need to tell you it will be an exceedingly trying and disagreeable occasion, and, if you will allow me to say so, hardly proper for a lady to be present."

But Mrs. Waldron was obdurate, and though her face grew ghastly and shudder after shudder shook her frame, she still persisted in her determination.

Accordingly, that afternoon, robed in her heavy weeds, her thick veil drawn close about her face, she repaired trembling, and almost faint with a sickening horror and dread, to the place to which the casket had been taken when removed from the tomb.

She had the key to it, and had refused to give it up until the moment that it should be needed.

As she entered the gloomy room leaning upon the arm of her lawyer she started violently, while a fearful trembling seized her.

A sickening odor pervaded the apartment, for it had been freely sprinkled with carbolic acid and other disinfectants to guard against contagion and keep the air pure and sweet.

In the center of the room, and resting upon two trestles, stood the once beautiful white-velvet casket in which the lifeless form of Trixy had been placed.

It was now soiled and disfigured by dampness and mildew; the rich, heavy, silver handles were tarnished and almost black, and the moldy, earth-like smell, which was plainly perceptible, even above the disinfectants, was un-

pleasantly suggestive of the regions from which the receptacle had been taken.

One of the medical examiners of the city, a magistrate and an undertaker were present, besides the lawyer who accompanied Mrs. Waldron; and an expression of something very like disgust swept over their faces as the obstinate woman entered the room.

There was a solemn hush as the undertaker removed the silver screws from the lid of the casket preparatory to unlocking it, and it seemed to that shrinking woman, who had hard work to keep from shrieking aloud, and who now began to wish that she had remained away from the horrible place, that he never would be through.

But the last one was at length removed and laid carefully aside.

"The key," the man said briefly, and holding out his hand for it.

The lawyer took it from Mrs. Waldron's trembling fingers and passed it to him.

The medical examiner, the undertaker and the magistrate stood near the head of the casket. Mrs. Waldron and her attendant remained at the opposite end of the room.

The key turned in the lock with a slight grating noise; the undertaker then slowly removed the lid.

For a moment not one of the group seemed inclined to look at what had been concealed beneath, then the eyes of the medical examiner were turned to that form beneath the glass.

A queer, startled expression swept over his face and he stood as if transfixed, a low exclamation of surprise escaping him.

The other two men drew nearer then, and they also became riveted to the spot, their faces blank with amazement, while low murmurs of wonder broke from their lips.

"What is it?" gasped Mrs. Waldron, who was leaning cowering and shivering against the side of the room.

"The lady can come forward without any fear," the medical examiner now said, glancing toward her; and supported by her lawyer, she tottered to the side of the casket.

One look made her start and clutch the arm of her companion with a fierce grip.

The next moment she had thrown aside her heavy veil, and was bending with white face and staring eyes over that transparent lid.

A strange sight met her gaze. Instead of the disfigured and revolting spectacle which she had expected to behold, *there lay the beautiful girl just as she had last seen her—lovely, peaceful as a sleeping saint!*

Her face was as fair and pure, her hands as perfect and waxen, her hair as carefully arranged as they had been when her heart-broken friends had stood over her to take their last farewell look before they bore her forever away, as they supposed, to her last long home.

Not a fold of the costly robe in which they had arrayed her was displaced; not a ruffle of the rich lace adorning it was either discolored or disarranged. Everything was simply perfect, and no one was able to account for the mystery.

"She cannot be dead!" Mrs. Waldron involuntarily exclaimed, with white lips, and in a voice of horror, as she turned to the medical examiner.

His lips curled slightly at the words.

"Of course, she is dead; no one could lie in a tomb several months and be alive," he said; "but such a state of preservation, so long after death, is unheard of. I cannot account for it."

"I have heard of instances," he resumed, after a moment, "where persons had been poisoned by arsenic, and their bodies were preserved to a certain extent for a long time; but I never heard of anything so perfect as this. Remove the glass," he concluded, turning to the undertaker.

The glass was unfastened, lifted, and laid aside, and now every one expected to see an instantaneous change in that fair face.

But no; it rested upon its satin pillow as calm, peaceful and beautiful as before, every feature as perfect, every wave of the curling hair as natural as it had been in life.

The medical examiner, with a queer expression on his face, lifted one of the waxen hands that lay upon the pulseless bosom, but let it drop instantly again as if it had burned him, and his eyes looked blankest amazement. He laid his hand upon the white forehead, and then turned sternly to those who were curiously observing him, every vestige of color gone out of his face, even his lips white as those of the dead.

"*It is not a natural body at all,*" he said hoarsely; "it is *an effigy!*"

Confusion reigned for a few minutes following this statement.

Mrs. Waldron shrieked and was borne half-fainting to a chair at the opposite side of the room, while the others bent curiously over the casket to examine the strangely beautiful and life-like figure within it.

It was even as the examiner said.

The face and bust of the supposed body were of plaster, representing with surprising faithfulness Trixy Waldron's features, and painted to look so natural, so life-like, that no one had been able to discover the fraud underneath the glass.

The hair was simply a wig, but exceedingly like the young girl's, and the little frizzes so carefully arranged about the face and head effectually concealed the fact that it had not grown there. The hands so white and faultless were of wax, and so perfect, that, beneath the rich lace which fell partially over them, it was not strange every one was deceived. A heavy piece of wood had been laid in for the body, over which the clothing had been most carefully adjusted.

"What does this strange thing mean? Who could have done it? When and how was it accomplished, and *what has become of the real body?*" were some of the queries which those startled men blankly asked each other, upon making this astonishing discovery.

They were puzzling questions, and no one appeared able to answer, scarcely to comprehend them. Not only did it seem certain now that a crime had been committed, but also that the tomb had been robbed of its dead; that the body had been stolen in order the more effectually to conceal the nature of the deed, and make it more difficult to fix suspicion upon any individual.

This now appeared to explain somewhat the mystery of the missing key to the Waldron tomb, and as they considered and speculated upon the matter, over that beautiful effigy, indignation waxed hotter and stronger than ever against the lovely girl who was so wearily awaiting the day that was to decide her fate.

CHAPTER XVIII

"IT IS ALL A MYSTERY"

MRS. WALDRON'S excitement was so excessive upon discovering tha Trixy's body had been tampered with, that for a long time she was upon the verge of hysterics.

But when she began to grow calm, the medical examiner approached her, and gravely asked:

"Mrs. Waldron, can you think of any possible solution to this puzzle?"

"No, no," she began wildly, "it is the greatest and most horrible mystery in the world to me, I have no idea, unless——"

She stopped short as if some startling thought had suddenly occurred to her.

"Unless what?" was the breathless query of four eager voices.

"I don't know, I don't know, I have no right to say anything; my thoughts are only suspicions—it is wrong for me to give utterance to them," she cried disconnectedly.

"My dear madam," began the magistrate, with dignity, and *something* of authority, "if you think of *anything* that will throw light on this crime—*this double crime,* it becomes your duty to make it known."

"But it will only involve others," she said, with a shudder.

"Very likely," was the dry rejoinder. "One, and that one a delicate girl, could hardly have done all this alone, and it must have been done since the funeral of the young lady."

"I don't know, it is all a mystery."

"But you forget that the key was lost or stolen—does not this explain it? Whoever practiced this fraud must have first procured the key to the tomb," said her lawyer conclusively.

"It would seem so," Mrs. Waldron answered thoughtfully, "and yet I could almost swear that everything in that casket to-day, every article of dress, every fold and ruffle, was exactly the same, as when it was carried from my house on that day. I arranged everything about her robe and hair myself with the assistance of the undertaker, and I did not discover that any change had been made—did you?" she asked turning suddenly to him.

"No. I should have sworn, if called upon to do so, that nothing had been disturbed," he answered in perplexity.

"It does not seem possible that this change could have been made in my house; and yet—and yet——"

They all saw that she had thought of some solution to the mystery, something that troubled her, and which she shrank from giving utterance to.

"I think it will be necessary for you to tell us of what you are thinking," her lawyer said gravely.

"There is only one way to account for this, I believe," she said, after a moment of indecision. "You are all aware that I have a nephew who is an artist, both painter and sculptor. His studio had been in my house during the last few years, for I had a room that was not in use, and I offered it to him for that purpose. He has frequently taken casts of people's features for busts, but I never knew him to *paint* one before; neither was I aware that he had made one of my niece, although I know that she used to visit his room frequently. On the afternoon preceding Miss Waldron's funeral everything about the body had been arranged as you have seen it to-day, and I sent for Mr. Harcourt, who was very fond of Trixy, to come and look at her before the glass was placed over the casket. He came, and remarked upon her life-like appearance, and seemed very much affected, and stood by while the glass was fastened down. After that he offered to remain with the body all night, as I was very weary from watching many nights and my husband was ill. I gladly accepted his offer, and I think he must have had something to do with this fraud which has been discovered to-day."

"You must have some reason for such a suspicion," suggested the magistrate.

"I have, for aside from my belief that he alone could have made that bust, I have recently discovered that he entertains a deep affection for Miss Preston."

"Ah!" The exclamation of surprise came from every other individual in the room.

"If your suspicions are correct, then he is, without doubt, implicated in the crime," remarked her lawyer.

"I do not wish to believe that," Mrs. Waldron said, regretfully; "but I think, perhaps, he might have suspected that Miss Preston was guilty, and his love for her prompted him to shield her in this way, but how it was done or when I am unable to surmise."

"I think they both must have accomplished the change during that last night," the undertaker remarked.

"Why do you think so?" she asked.

"Because I do not think one could have done it alone, and it is not likely that a man could have arranged everything so exactly as you left it."

"Mr. Harcourt is very tasteful and skillful in the arrangement of drapery, but there is no other explanation that suggests itself to me."

"If he is guilty of this, and accomplished the change that night, he must have already had a bust made, for he never could have accomplished this in one night. It requires time to take the cast of a person's features and then form the bust from that, not to speak of the painting of the face afterward," said the medical examiner.

"I think they must have been already made," Mrs. Waldron said, thoughtfully.

"That does not seem possible, either," replied the other, "for a bust made while the young lady was in health would not look like her after her severe illness."

"She was not much changed; her face appeared as round and as full as in health; I noticed it particularly while I was arranging her hair, and her hands looked as if really molded from wax; yes, the more I consider the matter, the more fully I am convinced that my nephew knew about and assisted in this thing that night before the funeral."

"How can that be possible?" asked the magistrate; "there must have been some noise, some confusion, to disturb you; how could the body have been taken from your house without some one hearing some suspicious noise?"

"Mr. Harcourt's room is just across the hall from what used to be my niece's; there are a pair of stairs leading from it down to an outside door into a small garden; it might have been easily accomplished; and then we were all so weary and slept so soundly that night," Mrs. Waldron returned, musingly.

"But it seems as if it *must* have been discovered the next day at the time of the funeral," suggested her lawyer.

"The house was dark; it was a rainy, dismal day; no one thought of fraud, and we were all so wretched and sad; besides, no one discovered it to-day until the glass was removed," the lady said, as if this last argument was unanswerable.

"True," the medical examiner said; "we were all deceived even in this well-lighted room; it would have been very easy for that perfect face and bust to escape detection in a darkened room. Then, too, if the change had been made after the body was placed in the tomb, everything could not have been so nicely done; there would have been some traces of haste, or dust, or dirt. No; I believe with madam that the body was removed before the casket was taken from the house."

"But the key, who took that, and for what purpose?" some one asked.

True, the key was missing, and no one could suggest why or wherefore, if the body was removed from the casket before the funeral.

"Did Mr. Harcourt go away for any length of time *after* the funeral?" the magistrate asked, after a pause.

"Not for several weeks. After Miss Preston had nearly recovered her usual health, he visited her one evening and went away the next morning. During the forenoon of the same day she also disappeared," Mrs. Waldron returned.

"Ah! that circumstance, of itself, may amount to considerable. They may have left the city together."

"I think not," she replied thoughtfully, "for when my nephew finally returned and I communicated to him the fact of Miss Preston's disappearance, he appeared very much startled and distressed."

"That is another suspicious circumstance!"

"Why so?"

"Because he would see at once that if Miss Preston was suspected of the crime, it would look very badly for

their mutual cause if it became known that they went away on the same day."

"I know well enough that Eliot Harcourt is not guilty in any way of this crime—he may have assisted Laura in removing the body in order to shield her from the consequences of discovery, but farther than that I do not believe he is implicated," Mrs. Waldron said warmly.

She had never dreamed that things would get so mixed and threatening when she began to use the evidence that she had discovered to persecute Laura. She had always felt a strong liking for the young man, and could not bear the thought of his being implicated in the case.

"It looks very much like it to me," said the magistrate. "You say you have recently discovered that he has a strong attachment for Miss Preston."

"Yes, he acknowledged as much to me; but——"

"Ah! yes, it is all very plain. Miss Preston was an heiress—would be a double one if her cousin died. Mr. Harcourt was a poor, struggling artist. He loved the heiress, he wanted her money. The girl was not satisfied with her portion, and undoubtedly they planned this thing together, and after a time they would marry and the struggling artist would need to struggle no longer. It was very cleverly contrived and executed, no doubt, but the law, my dear friends," he concluded, wisely and impressively, "is a mighty instrument and has found them out."

Mrs. Waldron was very much excited—she was pale and trembling and getting exceedingly nervous.

"What has become of this large fortune?" the medical examiner asked, his eyes fixed upon the woman's face, he alone seeming to notice her excessive agitation.

"It is in the care of Miss Preston's lawyer," she said briefly.

"What will become of it if Miss Preston is executed?" he pursued, still watching her closely.

Ah, how she hated these questions which everybody

was asking her! They were like poisoned arrows thrown into her quivering flesh.

Her lips twitched, her eyes dilated with an inward horror, as she whispered, her voice failing her:

"It goes to my sons."

"Um! Just so," briefly ejaculated the man, shooting a keen glance into her pallid face; and it was noticeable that he asked no more questions, made no more comments upon that occasion.

"It will be necessary to search Mr. Harcourt's studio," remarked the pompous magistrate. "I presume you have no objection to that being done?"

"Certainly not," she answered, readily, but with a weary sigh, and abruptly rising, she signified to her lawyer her desire to return home.

It was with a very heavy heart that she sought the seclusion of her own room, and endeavored to think of some explanation of the harassing mystery of the effigy concealed in the casket.

She did not doubt Eliot's agency in the matter—indeed, she *knew* that no hand save his could have executed that cunning piece of work that she had seen to-day, and this was why he had been so disturbed when she had told him so long ago that she was going to make her discoveries public—he had known that his agency in the matter would come to light.

But for what purpose had it been done? Had he really stolen and concealed the body in order to screen Laura?

If such was the case, he might have believed that she was guilty of the crime of which she was accused, in spite of his vehement protestations to the contrary, on that day when they had had such a stormy interview, and he had said that he would bend every nerve toward vindicating her.

And whither had Trixy's body been taken? Where was it concealed? And the wretched woman grew heart-sick as she thought of it, and wondered how it would all end; if it

would ever be explained, and if, in carrying out her revenge upon Laura, she would be the means of wrecking the life and ruining the character of Eliot Harcourt—the child of the step-sister who had been so kind to her and her aged father, when they had no home of their own.

She did not wish to ruin him, and she felt doubly remorseful now at this new trouble, on account of another wrong she had done him, and which haunted her like some restless ghost.

It was a wretched, miserable night that she spent after that day of startling horror, and when she came forth from her chamber the next morning, she was haggard and wan, and ten years seemed to have been added to her age.

That day Eliot Harcourt's studio was thoroughly searched, and a cast of Trixy's face found among some rubbish in a chest.

This was deemed proof sufficient that he was implicated in Laura's crime. The reporters for the papers seized upon the facts with characteristic greediness, and a startling romance was at once woven and published to the world, and interest in the tragedy increased a hundredfold.

Great excitement prevailed regarding the missing body. Detectives were sent in every direction to try and discover some trace of it, and meanwhile the day of the trial drew near.

CHAPTER XXIX

A CRUEL BLOW

Only a day or two before the trial, Laura was surprised by a visit from two individuals, whom she did not suppose would ever seek her again under any circumstances.

William Waldron was one of these, and he came to her

looking wan and wretched, and was very restless in his manner.

"I don't suppose you are very glad to see me, Laura," he said in a nervous, hurried way, "but I have come to make one last appeal to you."

"Appeal?" Laura said, inquiringly, and for the moment not comprehending to what he referred.

"Yes; I have come to ask if you will let me save you?"

"Save me! How can *you* save me?" she asked astonished.

"I *can* do it, and believe I am the *only* one in the world who has the power. But, Laura, it will be only for my *promised wife* that I shall exercise it," he returned, searching her face eagerly.

She flushed at this, but still looking surprised, asked:

"How can that be, how can the circumstance of my promising to be any one's wife remove suspicion from me?"

"No matter how, now—if you will only promise to marry me *I will save you*," he said, bending close to the bars and speaking with intense eagerness.

"Did your mother send you here to ask this?" Laura demanded sternly.

"No. Why?"

"Because it was upon that condition alone that *she* promised to conceal the evidence which she claimed to have found."

"My mother knows nothing of my visit to you; she knows nothing of the power which I possess to save you. You have only a few hours more, Laura, you will not hesitate when so much is at stake," he pleaded.

"I cannot marry you, William, I told you so once before," Laura replied gravely and decidedly.

"I know it, and I accepted your answer as final until after Trixy died—and—this trouble came upon you. Then I thought perhaps if I could find a way to save you, you

would listen to me, Laura, I love you; oh, give me your promise!"

"If it is in your power to save me, it becomes your duty to do so under any circumstances. Again I ask you *how* you will save me?"

"And again I tell you, it is no matter how—I *can* do it—it shall be a pleasure instead of a 'duty,' if you will bid me hope."

"And do I understand that you will not save me unless I fulfill this condition?" Laura asked, a look of wonder in her lovely eyes.

"No, I will not save you without your promise," he answered, sullenly, but his own glance wavered and fell before hers.

"And you *say* you 'love me.'"

"Yes, I do, Laura, notwithstanding the scorn in your tones betrays you do not believe it."

"You have it in your power to save me?"

"Yes."

"To clear my name from suspicion, to remove from me all disgrace?"

"Yes, all that——" he began, eagerly, but she interrupted:

"And you will not do this much for the sake of performing a noble deed, to save an innocent girl from a dreadful wrong; you will stand tamely by and virtually become a murderer yourself; you can see me doomed to the gallows, or worse yet, for it only takes a few moments to die, to imprisonment for life; this you will do unless I promise to bind myself to a future of misery and wretchedness."

"You are complimentary, Laura, surely, when you assume that a life spent with me will be miserable. But on my part I promise to do everything that mortal man can do to make you happy. Yes, I must have your promise, for I will not risk all that I must, to save you, without the hope of some reward," he returned firmly.

"You do not believe then that I committed this deed; you have found some evidence which goes to prove that I did not?" she asked eagerly.

"*I* am not going to commit *myself* to *anything*," he returned, with averted eyes, "but I will save you if you will be my wife; that is all I can or will say."

"I will divide my fortune with you for what you can do," Laura said, trying to read his face.

"That would be no more than I shall have anyway, if—if the verdict is against you," he answered, coldly.

Laura shuddered. She could not conceive how such heartlessness could exist in the world.

"I should like to be free once more," she said, gravely, almost solemnly; "should like to feel that no shadow rests upon my name or character in the eyes of the world, it would take a fearful burden from my heart; but, William Waldron, I will not purchase it at such a sacrifice as you demand of me, I will not voluntarily assume a worse bondage than that I now endure."

"Would you rather *die?*" he asked, between his closely shut teeth, while his features were almost convulsed with anger and disappointment.

"I do not *wish* to die," she returned, in a voice that was inexpressibly sad. "I am young, life looks very bright, still holds out much to me in spite of all that I have recently suffered; but if your offer is the only alternative, then, I must die, I suppose."

"Laura!" he cried, in startled tones, "you are mad!"

"No, I am not mad, and there is One who governs all things. He will suffer no evil to come upon me that is not for my good, and will give me strength to bear whatever He sends. If you have a knowledge of something that will save me——"

"I did *not say* that I possessed any such knowledge," William Waldron interrupted. "I simply said I could save you. I *can*, I swear I *will*, if you will give me your promise."

"Well, it makes no essential difference how you word it; if you *can* save me, and *will not,* if you will stand by, silent, inactive, knowing that I am innocent, and see me led forth to trial, and perhaps to an ignominious death, simply because I will not sin, because I will not perjure myself in the sight of God and man, I—can but die; but your future will not be a comfortable one; William, five times the amount of my fortune will never serve to make you forget."

"But I told you I should run a risk," the young man began, uneasily.

"Yes, you were willing to run a risk for your own selfish gratification, but not for the sake of doing a noble action; you are a brave man, truly," she said in accents of scorn, then added coldly:

"But I do not ask it of you; I have no desire that you should come to grief upon my account. Go your way, and I will patiently abide the issue."

He flushed to the roots of his hair. Her reply made him feel his own littleness and meanness of soul as he had never done before.

"Oh, Laura! do not be so bitter; if you would but consent," he pleaded eagerly.

"I will not," she returned haughtily. "*What!* are you to stand there begging me to forfeit my self-respect, and to do violence to all the holiest instincts of my nature? Go; I will not listen to you longer!"

"Then you are surely doomed; nothing can save you," he returned sullenly.

"That need not trouble you," she said coldly.

"It need! it *does!* Oh, Laura, do not believe me such a wretch!"

She turned and looked at him with a bitter smile.

"What else can I believe you to be when you say you hold my life in your hands and refuse to give it to me? If I die I am at once relieved from all trouble. I shall go where nothing unpleasant can ever reach me again; I

shall go to all my dear ones and perhaps find Trixy again. If I live and consent to the future which you hold out to me as the price of my life I should never know another peaceful moment in this world. Do you think I need to hesitate as to which condition to choose?"

William Waldron swore at this, and Laura turned upon him with haughty indignation.

"I will not permit that in my presence," she said.

"You drove me to it, Laura," William Waldron said apologetically. "A fellow doesn't like to be told that death is preferable to a life shared with him."

"Then let him show himself a man. I thought when I first refused to be your wife that you would accept my answer as the only one which a true woman could give an honest man if she did not love him. I see, however, that you have cherished enmity toward me for it; you have, perhaps, even plotted against me in my trouble, hoping thus to drive me to do your will. I knew your mother was deeply offended by my rejection of your suit, and she, too, sought to compel me to consent to a marriage with you by holding her evidence over me. Perhaps you may both be in league against me; I begin to think you capable of it."

"I told you that my mother knows nothing of my movements in this matter," he said.

"Yes, I believe you did; but you both have seemed to be working toward the same end. It is useless, however. There is no power on earth that can make me yield to your proposals," Laura returned proudly.

"You would not yield, I suppose, even to prevent another from sharing your own fate?" William Waldron said with malignant significance.

"Another! Whom?"

"Our aristocratic young artist, Eliot Harcourt."

"Eliot!" Laura cried, grasping one of the iron bars of her door to keep herself from falling, while her fair face grew ghastly white.

"Yes, Eliot. He is even now under arrest upon the suspicion of being an accomplice in this crime."

It was a cruel blow, and the delicate girl leaned heavily against the wall of her cell, weak and almost fainting from the effect of the startling words.

No one had told her of this; they did not wish her to know just yet all the horrible story which was making the ears of the public tingle, and their hearts to burn with horror and indignation; they did not wish her to be harassed with doubts and fears on account of it, or worry regarding Eliot. It would be enough for her to bear when it came out at the trial without having it to think of so long beforehand. But now it came like a thunderbolt to her.

"An accomplice!" she gasped, horror-stricken.

"Yes, your accomplice!" he answered, reckless of the consequences of his cruel words; and then he told her how everyone believed that he had been associated with her in this crime; he told her of the discovery of the fraud that had been perpetrated regarding Trixy's body, and that they had only been waiting for Eliot to be able to leave his room to try the case.

And having told her this, and planted this cruelest of all thorns in her heart, he went away, leaving her too wretched to care to live.

Dazed, benumbed, horror-stricken, Laura bowed her head upon her hands and tried to think.

Thrill after thrill of pain shot through her body as she thought of that beautiful loved form in that spotless velvet casket, and of its being disturbed—stolen and hidden away—and she had not a doubt that Eliot was the one who had accomplished the deed.

She had seen that life-like bust of Trixy in his studio, and she knew how easy it would be for him to paint out the rich color, the eyes, and give it the semblance of death and substitute it for the real body.

But why had he done it?

That was the question which caused her the most wretchedness.

What had been his object? Why had he thought it necessary and risked so much? And the solution of it all, as she went over it in her mind, did not tend to make her more cheerful or less anxious.

She knew he loved her—Doctor Van Dorn had confessed it to his sister, and she could not doubt it.

Doubtless Mrs. Waldron had acquainted him with her suspicions of her (Laura's) guilt; they had been so conclusive that he could not doubt it, and he had risked his own safety and character to try and save her. He had had the body removed to prevent an examination that he believed would result in the discovery of poison and secure her conviction. And yet Doctor Van Dorn had said that he did not believe her guilty. What could it all mean? He must believe it or he would not have risked so much for her.

This knowledge crushed her as nothing else had done. She could bear the scorn, indignation and suspicion of the world, but that Eliot should believe her guilty of this dreadful crime, and that he should have jeopardized his own life to save her, was too much for her to bear with resignation and calmness.

In the midst of her grief she was aroused by the appearance of her second visitor.

It proved to be General Von Osdel.

"My friend," he said gently, after they had exchanged greetings, and as he looked sadly upon her wan countenance, "as soon as I discovered that it was you who was suffering such wrong, I hastened to you. I should have found it out much earlier, but was called away to the deathbed of a friend. Will you forget that I ever said anything to wound you and let me stand by you like a dear elder brother? Can you trust me, Laurie?"

Laura held out both hands to the noble man, with a sense of inexpressible relief and comfort.

How great the contrast between him and the selfish, revengeful man who had but just left her! It seemed as if he was like a fortress, a mighty tower of strength to shield her from the coming storm.

Mrs. Van Dorn, Agnes and the doctor, were all stanch, true friends, but there was something in the calm, conscious air of power about this man that gave her more assurance and confidence than she had known at any time heretofore.

"Trust you?" she answered, the tears gathering in her eyes. "Most thankfully. I was more wretched than I can tell you just now, but your coming has seemed to inspire me with something of hope."

He bent down and touched her trembling hands with his lips.

"Poor little white dove! how it droops in its cruel cage; but we hope to let the captive go before very long," he said, with his kindly smile, and his manner was so gentle, so respectful, he seemed so noble and good, that had not her heart been irrevocably given to Eliot it must have yielded its deepest homage to the grand, true friend who, forgetting his own pain and disappointment, had come to minister to and comfort and support her in this trying hour.

When he left her she was much more cheerful, and having unburdened herself to him, her heart seemed lightened of half its load.

This had been a day of strange events, and they were not ended yet, for that night there was a fire in ——th street.

Three large blocks were burned, and Mrs. Waldron's was in one of them, and here, through the carelessness of a servant, the fire originated.

Mrs. Waldron was away from home that night, having gone out of town to attend a private concert at the house of a friend, but she arrived before the fire subsided and sat down, unnerved and utterly incapable of trying to save

anything, upon the opposite side of the square, where she could watch the flames creeping up and devouring the beautiful home that had been hers for so many years.

"*It* will burn with all the rest and that will be the last of it; fate has decreed what I lacked courage to do," she muttered, as she saw the roof fall and a sheet of solid flame roll forth from the aperture.

"Rather an unfortunate circumstance, Roxey," said a well-known voice in her ear at this instant.

She started to her feet, and turning found herself confronted by Mr. Job Temple.

"Yes, yes," she returned, in some confusion, and wondering if he had heard what she had said; "it has been my home for fifteen years."

"You'll be sorry to lose it and so many nice things that it contained. There wasn't time to get out nigh all, though they've saved considerable," her companion remarked.

"There were plenty of choice things that I would have liked saved, but they might as well be burned as to be broken and defaced by removing them," Mrs. Waldron returned moodily.

"No important papers there that were likely to be destroyed, I hope?" queried Mr. Temple, his keen eyes on her face.

"No, no; nothing that amounted to anything," she said nervously, and with a shiver. "My lawyer has my insurance papers, and there was nothing else that could do one any good."

"Um!" ejaculated the little old gentleman, with a queer sparkle in his eyes, whereupon he moved away, leaving Mrs. Roxena to the enjoyment of her own thoughts.

CHAPTER XXX

THE DAY OF TRIAL

THE LONG looked-for day of the trial at last arrived.

For many years there had not been so great a sensation over any crime, and at an early hour the court-room was crowded to excess by the curious and anxious.

The terrible and wilful murder of a young and innocent girl for the sake of her fortune, together with the fact that the body had been stolen and either hidden or destroyed, not to mention the fact that the parties accused belonged to the higher class of society, had caused no little discussion among all sorts and conditions of men.

All efforts to recover the missing body of the dead girl had proved utterly futile; but the evidence that a murder had been committed was so strong, and everything pointed so directly to Eliot Harcourt, the talented artist, and Miss Preston, the beautiful heiress, as the perpetrators of the crime, that no further delay was deemed necessary or advisable.

Mrs. Waldron was, of course, present on this all-important day, and she was accompanied by her eldest son and the nurse who had attended Trixy during her illness; and these were the principal witnesses for the prosecution.

Mrs. Waldron looked anxious and harassed. Her manner was restless and nervous, and her eyes roved incessantly from face to face.

William Waldron wore a moody and sullen expression and sat most of the time with his head bent and his eyes fixed upon the floor.

Laura, looking fair as some pure lily, sat nearly opposite them, and was accompanied by Mrs. Van Dorn and Agnes, while General Van Osdel took his station just behind Laura's chair.

Their manner was quiet and composed, their faces calm

and untroubled. From the entire absence of all agitation or distress one would almost judge that they had come there to listen to the discussion of some entertaining subject instead of to battle for the life and fair fame of a lovely girl.

The beautiful prisoner was very, very pale. She had thrown back her veil immediately upon taking her seat, and every eye was at once fixed intently upon her; but her delicate face was stamped with the unmistakable index of truth, purity and innocence.

Her clear eyes did not shrink nor waver beneath the hundreds that were gazing upon her, although her sensitive lips quivered slightly at finding herself the mark for such rudeness and curiosity. She was modest and quiet in her deportment throughout the trial, patient and gentle to a surprising degree during all the fearful ordeal, and thus won for herself the wonder and admiration of all.

Mr. Job Temple was also present, but he sat apart from the others and where he could command a full view of all parties, and it was noticeable that during all the important evidence that was presented his small, keen eyes hardly left the face of Mrs. William Waldron.

Eliot Harcourt was not in the court-room, not being allowed to be present until after Laura should testify, and Doctor Van Dorn remained with him and the officer who had him in custody in an adjoining room.

The indictment was read and the evidence for the prosecution given at some length.

Mrs. Waldron testified that upon the night of Miss Waldron's death, after she and the nurse had completed the necessary duties to the dead, she had told the woman she might retire and she would remain as watcher. Upon being left alone, she began to put the room in order, gathering up the vials and cups that had been used during the girl's sickness, and while so doing she had noticed the strange odor proceeding from a tumbler standing upon the table by the bedside. She took it up and instantly

recognized it as one that Miss Preston was in the habit of using in her own room. She did not think it strange that the tumbler was there, but she did wonder what could have been used in it that had such a pungent smell. She put it back upon the table, and thought no more of it, until going to the grate to fill a spoon, which had been used to give some powerful medicine, with ashes, it came in contact with some hard substance buried there. She pushed the ashes aside, and discovered a small bottle partly filled with a liquid, and labeled "poison." She drew it out, uncorked it, and immediately recognized the odor as the same that had proceeded from the tumbler. A horrible suspicion instantly seized her that her niece had not died a natural death.

"Why then did you not immediately call your physician to satisfy your mind regarding the fact?" the counsel for the defense asked.

"Because I was so horrified I did not know *what* to do. I was stupefied, paralyzed almost," she said, with white lips, as if even now the remembrance of that discovery unnerved her.

Then she went on to say that the more she thought of the matter the more repugnant it became to her; she could not endure the thought of the disgrace and scandal which would follow the knowledge that a crime had been committed; she could not tolerate for an instant the idea of a post-mortem examination, yet she knew she was doing wrong to conceal the facts that had come to her knowledge. Then she began to consider who could have been guilty of the deed—the poison was put there for a purpose of course —who would be benefited by the child's death, who was at enmity with her? Then it flashed upon her that Miss Preston alone would reap any advantage from the event, besides, they had not been friendly for some time, seeming to avoid and dislike each other, and moreover, she had recognized the vial as one which had stood on Miss Preston's

mantel for several weeks. She believed Laura guilty of the crime.

She was cross-questioned in the closest manner by Laura's counsel, but did not contradict herself in a single instance. Her evidence was given in a clear and concise manner, and she swore that she had no knowledge or suspicion of how that poison could have come in Miss Waldron's room if Laura had not put it there. Again and again she was made to state this, until the keen lawyer was forced to believe her, and began to doubt his own theory, that she herself had put it there to drive Laura to agree to her obnoxious proposals, and so for the time that point became a puzzle to him.

One or two servants, who had been in Mrs. Waldron's employ, were now called, and they swore to having seen both the tumbler and the vial in Miss Preston's room, and also that the two young ladies had not been on the best of terms during the few months previous to Miss Waldron's death.

William Waldron also testified upon this point, and that Laura's deportment during her cousin's illness had been somewhat singular and unnatural.

The nurse testified regarding her leaving her charge with Miss Preston at the latter's earnest request, and that aside from the little difficulty with her heart, which the doctor had mentioned, she had believed her patient to be doing well until she returned from the kitchen and found her dead. She also testified that afterward, when they were removing Miss Waldron's clothing, she had noticed that the front of the night-dress was wet, as if something had been spilled upon it, and that there was a peculiar odor about her. Yes—as the bottle containing the poison was presented to her to smell—as near as she could remember it was very like that. She described Miss Preston's excessive agitation, and remarked that it was very unlike the deep but self-contained grief or anxiety that she had manifested before the crisis was passed; though

she admitted that she had not thought strange of it until she had learned of the suspicions against her.

Mrs. Waldron again testified that she had accused Miss Preston of the deed; but although she could not rid herself of the belief that she was guilty, she was so vehement in her protestations of innocence that she was undecided for a long time what to do about the matter. Her regard for the girl, who had been a member of her family for so many years, was so great that she shrank from publicly accusing her of so fearful a crime, and so she had concealed it, hoping that Laura herself would be brought to confess it, until her conscience would allow her to do so no longer. She also spoke of the strange behavior and fainting at the funeral of her cousin, and others were called upon to substantiate this.

Doctor Sutherland said, that at the time of Miss Waldron's death he fully believed that she had died of heart disease. It had been developing itself during her sickness, and he had feared that after the crisis should pass, in her weakened state that the result might be fatal. He had spoken of it to the nurse, but he did not tell even her how great his anxiety was. It was true that he made no very critical examination of his patient after her death —one glance had convinced him that she was dead—and he had no suspicion of foul play, and the girl had dropped away just in the way that he feared she might. There was a *possibility,* he admitted, that she had been poisoned, but he could not bring himself to believe that Miss Preston, who was very faithful and untiring in her attention to her cousin during her sickness, could be guilty of the deed. He was obliged to confess that she acted wildly and unnaturally after her death, but attributed it to the fact of her being utterly unnerved by the unexpected event. No, he had not the slightest suspicion of any one else. He had not noticed any peculiar odor about Miss Waldron —certainly nothing like that which proceeded from the vial

—but that was not strange, since they had been using powerful restoratives about her before he arrived.

A good deal more evidence was given and a good many incidents related, which were nothing in themselves apparently, but which, when viewed in relation to the crime, might mean a great deal; but the burden of the proof against Laura seemed to lie in the facts that she alone would be benefited by her cousin's death; that they had been at enmity for a long time; the poison concealed in Trixy's room and in vessels that had been in Laura's possession for so many weeks and months; her unnatural display of grief, which was construed to proceed from guilt and remorse, and her flight after being accused of the deed.

Then Eliot Harcourt's supposed complicity in the affair came up, and Laura was obliged to sit there with burning cheeks, averted eyes and heaving bosom, and listen to Mrs. Waldron's evidence regarding his confession of love for her; how excited he had become when she spoke of disclosing what she had discovered and his ominous threat if she should do so.

Then Laura was called up for examination, and though she was weak and heart-sick from the evidence to which she had just listened, she did not falter as she went forward and took her stand in the witness-box.

She looked very lovely in her plain black silk dress and simple hat, with its long, black ostrich plume, while the colorless face beneath, with its delicate, high-bred beauty, appealed involuntarily to the heart of every observer.

She told her story very clearly, in a modest yet direct way, that had the ring of truth in every word and sent the conviction home to every listener that, after all, they might have been mistaken.

Cold, stern faces began to soften into lines of kindness and sympathy, and hearts that heretofore had been steeled against her, and filled with indignation and bitterness toward her, began to yearn, and fill and overflow with pity

for the lovely girl who could thus calmly and bravely stand up before her accusers to battle for her life and reputation.

Not once did she falter throughout the statements; not once did her clear, truthful blue eyes waver during all the tedious cross-examination that followed.

At first they allowed her to tell her story in her own way; the judge was very kind to her and did not seem insensible to the music of her voice—so fresh, young and clear—as it fell upon the otherwise unbroken silence of that crowded room.

She told how she had gone to Trixy's room so glad and grateful for the hope that had been vouchsafed them that she would recover; how she had found the nurse weary and faint from long watching and fasting. She acknowledged having urged her to go below and refresh herself with a cup of tea while she watched with Trixy. She told how they had talked gravely and solemnly of the danger that they hoped was past, how the sick girl had expressed a doubt of returning health, and was even at that moment attacked with a spasm of pain; how it had passed, then another had seized her, and almost before she realized what it portended, she lay dead in her arms—gone from her forever, without a word or a look of farewell.

Many a heart swelled with sorrowful sympathy, many a tear was brushed hastily aside as this simple, touching, artless story was told.

They asked her if, during her cousin's sudden attack, she had administered any medicine from either vial, cup, or tumbler.

No; she had given her nothing; she had not taken even so much as a spoon into her hand during her stay in the room, she said.

Had she any idea how the tumbler and vial, that had been in her own room, had come to be in her cousin's?

No; she distinctly remembered having used the tumbler that morning about the cleansing of her teeth, and she had

no remembrance of having seen it in Trixy's room until Mrs. Waldron showed it to her when she accused her of the crime.

Then Mrs. Waldron had accused her of it immediately; would she relate the substance of that conversation to the court?

Laura flushed slightly at this, but she complied, telling all but the disgraceful proposals which Mrs. Waldron had made to her. This she could not bear to speak of so publicly, although her counsel knew of it, and would use it if necessary.

She was next questioned regarding Eliot's supposed complicity.

She replied that she had known nothing of the fraud that had been perpetrated, until within the last two days.

Her eyes met those of William Waldron, as she said this, and he flushed to his temples as he remembered how she had learned the fact.

"Then you knew nothing of the existence of that bust previous to this?" the counsel for the prosecution asked.

"Yes, she knew that Mr. Harcourt had made it; she had seen it, and been startled by its life-like resemblance," she replied; and then she was made to tell the circumstances under which she had seen it.

"Why did you fly from the city if you were not guilty? Why did you not remain and boldly face the consequences?"

Again Laura's face flushed.

William Waldron sat there before her, and she could not endure to speak of the pain she had given him; she did not like to publish to the world that she had refused to be his wife, and that she believed it was out of revenge for this very circumstance that she had been thus persecuted. If she could save herself without doing him or the woman who had cared for her for so many years an injury, she would do it.

"Because I could not stay with any one who believed me guilty of such a deed," she said simply.

William Waldron looked at her in astonishment. He had believed she would reveal everything—his mother's threats of revenge and her almost criminal propositions, and his own recent interview with her.

She was allowed to leave the box for the present, and Eliot Harcourt was called. He came in, looking pale and emaciated, but perfectly calm and self-possessed.

He acknowledged having made that life-like bust of Trixy some time before her illness, and at once confessed himself as the author of the "fraud" that had been practiced upon the friends of the young girl.

This announcement caused considerable confusion in the court, and Laura leaned forward, looking exceedingly anxious and troubled.

Eliot gave her a glance of encouragement, and his lips parted with a smile of reassurance as he noted her gesture.

"You say you were the author of the fraud; was it through your agency that it was effected?" Mrs. Waldron's counsel demanded.

"It was."

"How was it effected?"

"Perhaps before I explain that I may be allowed to state for what purpose the bust was made in the first place?" Eliot said inquiringly, and at the same time bending a glance upon Mrs. Waldron that made her nerves tingle sharply.

Permission was granted him and he began:

"Miss Beatrice Waldron's feelings for years past have been continually wounded by being told that she was a fright, and being made to feel that she was obnoxious in appearance to all around her, and it became a source of great unhappiness to her."

Mrs. Waldron here whispered nervously to her lawyer and he immediately objected to Eliot's remarks, contending

that they did not bear upon the subject, and should not be received as evidence.

A sharp discussion followed during which Laura's counsel asserted that all that Mr. Harcourt had to say was with reference to the alleged crime, and that since permission had been granted him by the court to relate the facts regarding the bust he should be permitted to do so in his own way.

The question was finally settled in favor of Eliot, and he proceeded:

"One day I met Miss Waldron coming from her aunt's parlor in deep distress; she confided to me the cause, which proved to be the old grievance, and it suddenly occurred to me that I would like to try an experiment and at the same time comfort my little friend by convincing her that she was not quite such a fright as she had been made to believe herself. I persuaded her to allow me to take a cast of her features, from which I made a plaster bust, carefully painted it to resemble Miss Waldron, and was doubly repaid for the time and labor I had expended upon it, both by my own success and the pleasure which Miss Waldron manifested at the faithful and lovely representation of herself. I requested her not to speak of what I had done, as I intended later to copy the bust in marble, and so no one knew anything of the affair at the time."

"What proof can you give of what you assert? How are we to know that this bust was made at the time you state?"

"My oath will have to be all the proof I can now give," Eliot answered somewhat proudly, "unless I mention the fact that Miss Preston learned through accident, and during the illness of her cousin, that I had made it."

The court seemed to be satisfied upon this point, for Laura had already testified to having seen the bust previous to her cousin's death.

"Now, as to the use to which you put this bust—are you prepared to state why and how it was done?"

"I am," Eliot Harcourt calmly and deliberately replied,

while his eyes again met those of Mrs. Waldron with a cold, proud, though assured look that told her he had indeed bent every nerve to win in the contest.

She leaned eagerly and breathlessly forward, her heart beating heavily with dread and fear of what was to come, while an expectant hush fell upon the crowd of excited listeners.

CHAPTER XXXI

ELIOT'S TESTIMONY

"I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end,
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine."

THERE was scarce a person in all that vast room who, having seen the play of "Hamlet," did not think of these words of his father's ghost as Eliot Harcourt gradually unfolded the tale of horror that follows:

"In order to explain 'why' I was actuated to practice the fraud to which I have confessed," Eliot continued with an apparent recklessness that amazed the curious crowd, but which puzzled and disturbed the counsel for the prosecution exceedingly, "I shall be obliged to repeat a conversation which I overheard between Mrs. Waldron and Miss Preston on the night succeeding Miss Waldron's death.

"Does it relate directly to the crime and the question under consideration?" interrupted Mrs. Waldron's counsel, who, having observed the violent start that his client gave at this unexpected announcement, began to fear some disclosure that would be detrimental to her interests.

"It does," Eliot returned, meeting his glance unflinchingly.

"It will not be necessary, since Miss Preston has already referred to it," was the reply, as if that disposed of the matter altogether.

Eliot glanced inquiringly toward Laura's lawyer, and he coolly remarked:

"I think Mr. Harcourt will give us some facts which Miss Preston did not touch upon," and the crimson flush which instantly suffused Laura's fair face convinced both judge and jury that the young lady had withheld something of a very interesting nature, if not of vital importance, and Eliot was requested to proceed.

"Upon the night in question, being very sad and greatly shocked at what had occurred, I did not go to my hotel as usual, but remained in my studio instead, which is just across the hall and nearly opposite the room that Miss Waldron used to occupy. I think it must have been nearly morning when the sound of voices proceeding from that room attracted my attention. Something in the earnest, startled tones made me fear that all was not as it should be, and thinking I might, perhaps, be able to render some assistance, I stole softly from my studio, crossed the hall, and was about to knock upon the door when I discovered that it was ajar, and I heard these words, *'and you killed her,'* spoken by Mrs. Waldron.

"We have heard all that—we do not wish it repeated," interrupted Mrs. Waldron's lawyer, impatiently.

But the judge decided that Mr. Harcourt should relate all that he had overheard—they wished to know if his statements agreed with Miss Preston's; and Eliot repeated all that Laura had told, while her persecutor sat by trembling and affrighted; she had not dreamed that any one had overheard that conversation, but now she remembered with a thrill of fear how afterward she had discovered that the door was ajar.

"That is in substance what Miss Preston has already

related," Laura's counsel remarked, as Eliot paused a moment to consider what to say next; "will you now tell the court something of the proposition which Mrs. Waldron made to Miss Preston? State it in the exact words that were used if you can recall them."

"Mrs. Waldron said to Miss Preston that she had a proposition to make to her, and it was, as near as I can remember, like this: 'If you will reconsider your refusal of William's proposal, this dreadful thing shall pass; no one knows or suspects anything of it save myself; everybody believes that Trixy died a natural death of heart disease, as Doctor Sutherland affirmed. So if *I* am silent, as of course I should wish to be, rather than that *my son's wife* should be brought into any trouble, you will be perfectly safe. I do not wish the family name disgraced by being carried into court, and flying over the country in newspapers in connection with a murder; it could do Trixy no good; it could not restore her life. It will be very easy to destroy or conceal these evidences which I have shown you, and the secret will be safe with you and me. Laura, will you marry William?"

"It is false—it is a lie!" came from Mrs. Waldron at this moment, as she half-arose from her chair, looking wild and excited.

Her son instantly pulled her back into her chair, and whispered something in her ear, while it was remarked that his face had also grown deathly pale.

There was an excited stir among the crowd of listeners, while many friendly, pitying glances were turned toward Laura, who sat with averted eyes and a bright stain upon her cheek, plainly showing that it pained her to have this delicate topic made so public.

Evidently Eliot Harcourt's statements were turning the tide of popular sentiment somewhat.

He was told to proceed, and went on to relate the remainder of that conversation with which the reader is so familiar, and whom we will not weary by repeating it,

excepting that portion where Laura had said, with so much spirit and indignation:

"If you really believe that I have done this dreadful thing of which you accuse me, you have no right, either moral or civil, to conceal it to carry out purposes of your own."

Eliot repeated this with so much effect that, before the last word had scarcely left his lips, a hearty round of applause broke from the excited multitude, indicating that sympathy was rapidly increasing for the lovely girl who had thus far borne herself so modestly and patiently during the tedious trial.

It was plain to be seen that Mrs. Waldron was losing ground on account of her persecution of Laura, while the mystery of the crime seemed to deepen.

She had sworn repeatedly that she suspected nothing, knew nothing regarding the poison until she found it in Trixy's room, and it became evident that she had either perjured herself, or else *some secret enemy* had done the deed, and the case was becoming intensely interesting and thrilling.

As soon as order and silence could be restored, Eliot was commanded to testify regarding the change he had confessed to have effected.

He spoke of what Mrs. Waldron had already stated in her evidence regarding his presence in Miss Waldron's room, when the undertaker had fastened the glass down over the casket, and his offer to remain and watch during the night to relieve her.

"And now," he said, his already pale face growing still paler from both excitement and weariness, while every breath was hushed and every eye fixed intently upon him, "I have only to tell why I resolved to accomplish the bold thing that has been discovered, and which has served to implicate me in this crime. I could not for one moment believe that Miss Preston was guilty of the deed of which she was accused, yet it was evident to my mind that there

had been foul play somewhere, and that unless strenuous efforts were exerted in her behalf, the crime would eventually be fastened upon her. I confess, after hearing the conversation which I have already related, that I had strong suspicions that it was only a plot to drive her to obedience, and I determined, if such a thing was possible, to sift it to the bottom. As soon as the house was quiet on the night referred to, I cautiously removed the glass from the casket, to see if I could discover about the body any odor of poison like that in the vial and tumbler, which I found where Mrs. Waldron had left them. I could not, but it suddenly occurred to me that there was one whom I could trust, and who would be able to detect its presence, if it had been administered to the young girl. I stole out of the house as quietly as I could, sought my friend, and persuaded him to return with me. He made as careful and critical an examination as he could without disturbing the body. He said he did not like the appearance of things at all—the girl *might* have died of heart-disease, as her physician stated, or she might have been poisoned, for there were evidences that some of the liquid from the vial had been spilled upon her neck and chin. This, and the extremely life-like appearance of the body, seemed to indicate that she had been foully dealt with, but it could only be positively determined by a post-mortem examination.

"'Mrs. Waldron would never consent to that,' I exclaimed, 'and I dare not propose it, for it would immediately involve us all in deep trouble.'

"He bent over the casket again, looking long and fixedly at the face of the girl, and he seemed to be strangely excited by the appearance of it. At last, lifting his head, he said, in low, constrained tones:

"'I would give much for the opportunity of testing this case, and if, as you say, Mrs. Waldron would not consent to a post-mortem examination, *could it not be accomplished without her knowledge?*'

"'You believe she has been poisoned then?' I cried.

"'I *believe* that something is very, very wrong, but I am not quite sure,' he said.

"'If you think the child has been murdered,' I answered, greatly excited, 'I will stop at nothing; the matter shall be investigated without delay; I will reveal what I have heard, give voice to my suspicions, and demand that the matter be looked into.'

"'I would not do that; it would be rash, and might result in nothing but trouble and mortification,' my companion replied, adding, 'but it would be a great satisfaction if I could test it; couldn't it be done without creating any disturbance?'

"'How?' I asked, a thrill of horror running through my nerves at the bare thought.

"'It ought to be done instantly,' he said, thoughtfully and with another strange look at the body, 'but there is not time before the funeral without discovery; will she be put in the Waldron tomb?'

"'Yes,' I said.

"'Do you know where the *key to it can be obtained?*'

"'Yes,' I answered again, my flesh creeping as I surmised of what he was thinking.

"'Could we get possession of it without exciting suspicion?'

"I told him I thought we could, and then he proposed that the evening following the obsequies, we should go quietly to the tomb and remove the body to some convenient place where he could examine it.

"'It ought to be done at once—if I dare—if I thought it would result as I suspect,' he said, so strangely excited, and so ghastly pale, that a terrible fear smote me.

"'*What do you suspect?*' I cried.

"He bent toward me and whispered something close to my ear, as if he feared even the dead might hear."

"What was it that he whispered in your ear?" inter-

rupted Mrs. Waldron's lawyer, sternly, "we want no half statements here."

"He said he recognized the poison; it was something peculiar and rare, and he thought, if he was *sure* that Miss Waldron had died from the effects of it, *that—he could tell who had done the deed!* but he would proclaim nothing of his suspicion; he would not commit himself by a single word, until either the natural or violent nature of her death was determined."

Every individual in that room hung breathless upon his words; every face was white with suspense, every attitude so eager, yet so motionless, that the silence, as he paused for an instant, was oppressive.

Mrs. Waldron's counsel looked exceedingly disturbed, while the faces of the woman herself and her son were like those of the dead.

"I did not give a thought to the danger of discovery after that," Eliot resumed. "Like a flash of light an idea suggested itself to me, and I resolved to act upon it—Miss Preston's reputation should be saved at all hazards. I told my friend so; I told him of the bust I had made; I went to get it to show it to him, and told him of the plan that had come to me of painting out the color and eyes, and substituting it for the natural body. At first he thought it could not be done, it was too bold a thing; there was too much risk in it, and yet he was strangely anxious and excited over the mystery that was tantalizing him. We at length resolved to try the effect, half an hour served to give the bust an appearance of death—I had a pair of waxen hands that I had used for models—we made the change, arranging the robe, the hair, and everything just as it had been under Mrs. Waldron's direction, and then placing the glass over all, we knew, that if nothing unforeseen occurred, our fraud would never be discovered.

"We had worked silently and rapidly—there was not a sound in the house, and after all had been accomplished, we wrapped Miss Waldron's body in a blanket, conveyed

it through my studio, down the stairs leading from it out of doors, and to the rooms of my friend, which were only a few steps from Mrs. Waldron's dwelling."

CHAPTER XXXII

CONFESSION

When Mr. Harcourt reached this point in his narrative he paused from excessive weariness and those near him could see that he was trembling with excitement.

He was still weak from his long illness, and was so white and feeble that the judge now commanded a chair to be brought and that he be allowed to sit during the remainder of his testimony.

Considerable excitement and confusion prevailed in the court-room while this order was being obeyed, and people whispered together with grave, wondering faces.

It was no light crime that the young man had just confessed to having perpetrated, and they could see no way of escape for him from the penalty of the law.

Why did he confess it so recklessly and boldly?

Either his love was so deep and strong for Laura that he was determined to share her punishment, or the examination of the body had revealed the real criminal. But even in that case it did not excuse him from the crime of having disturbed the dead.

Mrs. Waldron's lawyer looked deeply troubled, while Laura's counsel, on the other hand, was as calm and cool as if confident of the result of the strange trial.

The jury, too, looked puzzled and anxious. There had never been so strange a case tried before, they believed, and it was difficult for some of them to conceal the nervousness and suspense that they experienced on account of it.

"Who was the man who assisted you in the sacrilegious deed?" demanded Mrs. Waldron's counsel authoritatively.

"He is present and will soon be called upon to substantiate what I have already related," Eliot replied.

"His name—I demand his name."

"Doctor Thomas Van Dorn," the young artist answered, and every eye went roving about the room in search of the individual.

"He should be placed under immediate arrest—he, too, is implicated in this monstrous deed—he is as much a criminal as the prisoner at the bar," the lawyer said excitedly.

Laura's counsel here arose and calmly remarked:

"That will not be necessary, your honor, since Doctor Van Dorn is here, and intends to remain until the case is decided; and I propose to show you and the gentlemen of the jury that instead of performing a criminal act, both Mr. Harcourt and Doctor Van Dorn have only accomplished a very hazardous undertaking, which will result in bringing the real culprits to justice."

The statement created such a stir among the audience that the judge was obliged to exert himself considerably to be heard, as he commanded that order and silence should be observed.

Several questions were now put to Eliot regarding some portions of his story, but nothing new was elicited, and as he appeared greatly wearied he was allowed to leave the witness-box, and Doctor Van Dorn was called upon to take his place, the counsel for the defense contending that since the body had been given into his hands after being removed from Mrs. Waldron's house, it belonged to him to testify regarding it.

He was sworn, and then the most thrilling and interesting evidence of the trial ensued.

His statements at first were but a repetition of what Mr. Harcourt had made, and he confessed to having as-

sisted him in substituting the bust for the body and in assisting in its removal from Mrs. Waldron's house.

"Where was it taken to?"

"To my office, at No. —— West ——th Street."

"What was done with it there?"

"I made an examination to ascertain if poison had been administered."

"Did you find any evidence of poison about it?"

"I did."

Mrs. Waldron became so much excited upon this announcement that her lawyer spoke quite sternly to her to be quiet.

"You are convinced, then, that the young lady came to her death by poison being administered?"

"No, I am not."

Great surprise was manifested at this reply.

"What, then, is your theory of the cause of her death?"

"Her heart was very badly diseased, as her own physician stated," Doctor Van Dorn returned, with averted eyes.

"Did you discover indications of any other malady?"

"None aside from the fever from which she had been thought to be recovering."

"Yet you say you discovered poison about her. Explain yourself."

Doctor Van Dorn raised his eyes at this, and looking directly at the spot where Mrs. Waldron sat leaning weakly against her son, said:

"I found traces of the poison about her neck, chin, and even her lips, but fortunately none had entered her mouth."

"Then you are willing to swear that the young lady was not poisoned—that she did not die from the effects of poison?"

"Yes."

"You are satisfied that Miss Preston is not guilty of the crime charged to her?"

"Not only satisfied, but I positively affirm that neither

Miss Preston nor any other person administered poison of any kind to Miss Waldron, and that she did not die from the effects of anything of the kind."

The judge was again obliged to hold up his hand to enforce order at this, and the usher cried silence several times before it was restored.

"How, then, do you account for the presence of poison about the body and in the tumbler and vial discovered in Miss Waldron's room?"

"I cannot account for it, but I have a theory regarding it."

"State your theory."

All eyes were bent upon the young physician, eager faces were stretched forward, and a dead silence ensued. Every person in the room anxiously awaited the words that were to come.

"I believe they were placed there by some person or persons who were desirous of doing Miss Preston an injury. I believe that after that fatal attack of Miss Waldron's some one sprinkled her face and clothing with the liquid and then concealed the vial in the ashes, knowing it would be discovered, and for purposes of revenge, wishing the crime of murder to be fastened upon Miss Preston. This could readily be done, as that young lady was the only person with her at the time of the attack, and she apparently was the only person to be benefited by her cousin's death."

"Has anything come to your knowledge that would lead you to suspect any party or parties of this act?"

"There has," was the startling reply.

"State what it is."

"The belief—the *almost certainty* that the poison was obtained from my office. It is of a peculiar nature; is rarely used as a medicine, and I missed a small package of it a few days before I heard of Miss Waldron's death."

"What has led you to think that discovered in her room is a solution of the same?"

"The finding of the paper in which it was wrapped, and which is marked 'Poison' in my own handwriting."

"Where was the paper found?"

"In Miss Waldron's room."

"Did you find it?"

"I did not. It was found by Mr. Harcourt."

Eliot was here called to testify upon this point, and just at this moment William Waldron bent forward and whispered something to his mother's counsel.

He nodded an affirmative, and the young man then got up, went to the rear of the court-room and sat down by an open window.

Eliot then related how he had, impelled by some strange impulse, visited Trixy's room the night preceding his departure from the city, and after searching the room thoroughly he had discovered the apron in the clothes-bag, and the handkerchief, with the paper, to which were clinging some crystals wrapped in it, in one of the pockets.

"Can those articles be produced?" the judge asked, while Mrs. Waldron leaned forward, panting for breath and her face pallid as that of a corpse.

"Yes; they are in the possession of Miss Preston's counsel."

"Let them be produced."

A painful hush pervaded the room as the lawyer took up a package and proceeded to unfold it, revealing as he did so an apron, handkerchief and a small piece of white paper, on which there appeared to be something written.

"This paper," he said, rising, "has been subjected to a critical examination, and the crystals clinging to it were found to be of the same nature as the solution in the vial that was discovered in the ashes in Miss Waldron's room. The apron Mr. Harcourt identifies as one that once belonged to that young lady, and the handkerchief in which the paper was found wrapped is marked with a name that, to me, plainly indicates the author of all this wrong that has been done my client."

"What is the name marked upon the handkerchief?" demanded the judge sternly, while every breath was held with suspense.

"R. Waldron; and the marking and handkerchief are identical with another that I have in my possession, and which belongs to Mrs. Roxena Waldron."

Mrs. Waldron uttered a suppressed shriek as this revelation was made, and then sank back, cowering and miserable, in her chair.

She began to realize now something of what Eliot had meant when he had warned her against persecuting Laura, and had spoken so confidently of her innocence, and his belief that it would be established; and the glad and sympathetic glances which were now cast upon the beautiful prisoner, testified to the strong feeling that had been growing in her favor during all the trial, and that the belief in her guilt was fast disappearing before the light which was being thrown upon the mystery which had hitherto seemed so inexplicable.

But Mrs. Waldron's counsel made light of this last evidence.

How were they to know, he asked, that the handkerchief in which they claimed the suspicious paper had been found was actually discovered in Miss Waldron's apron-pocket? How, indeed, were they to know that any paper such as they claimed to have found, were there at all as stated? It would be very easy for any one interested in Miss Preston to secure one of Mrs. Waldron's handkerchiefs, obtain a paper with crystals of poison clinging to it, wrap it in the handkerchief, and *put* them in the pocket of the apron. These facts did not prove anything against his client, who swore she knew nothing of the matter, and they should not be received as evidence against her.

Laura's lawyer replied that he could prove Mr. Harcourt's statements, and called in Doctor Van Dorn again.

He swore that the paper in which the poison had been

wrapped was the one he had referred to, and that the writing on the back was his own.

Mrs. Croak, the woman who had nursed Trixy during her illness, was then again called, and was compelled to testify that Mrs. Waldron had worn this same apron on the day of Miss Waldron's death; that she recognized and remembered it from the fact that in administering a portion of medicine of a dark color, she had spilled some of it upon the front of it.

The apron was here held up, and the spots on it were plainly seen by everybody in the room.

She was then made also to testify that Mrs. Waldron *had taken her handkerchief from her pocket and wiped the medicine off from the apron with it.*

This was now held up to view, and spots of the same color were seen upon it.

Mrs. Croak also remembered that, shortly after, she had seen Mrs. Waldron remove the apron and hang it upon a nail that had been driven into the closet door; but she knew nothing regarding the paper, and had never seen it until that moment. The apron had afterward been hastily put into the clothes-bag and been forgotten.

All this proved nothing about the paper containing the poison, Mrs. Waldron's lawyer said, and it was only a waste of time to argue the point. It was evident that Miss Preston's friends had accomplished this piece of strategy for the purpose of implicating his client and exonerating her.

Laura's lawyer, on the other hand, stated that he could prove that the paper must have been put in the pocket of the apron on the very night in question, and before the handkerchief, which Mrs. Waldron had used to wipe medicine from it was dry, as some of it was also upon the paper; and he passed it to the judge to examine.

Doctor Van Dorn was then recalled and questioned regarding the statement he had already made about having missed the package from his office.

He said it was a small parcel that he had ordered from abroad, and that it had arrived on the night in question. He had just finished labeling it when some one rang his office bell. He laid the package on the table by itself and went to answer the summons. A man had the toothache and wished to have the offending member extracted. Doctor Van Dorn took his hat from him and put it on the same table where he had previously put the poison, extracted the aching tooth, received the price he named, and then turned to wash his hands, while his patient took his hat again and departed. Shortly after, the doctor, remembering he had left the poison on the table, went to put it away, and *it was gone!* He searched for it for a long time but he never found it, and it had been a mystery to him what had become of it until that night, when Eliot Harcourt had called him to go and examine Miss Waldron, he instantly recognized the poison which he showed him in the vial as being of the same nature as that which he had lost. That was one thing that had agitated him so and made him so anxious to ascertain the truth. When, several weeks after Mr. Harcourt had brought him the identical paper in which the drug had been wrapped, and which he had found in the pocket of the apron, and he had recognized his own handwriting, there was no longer any doubt in his own mind regarding the perpetrators of the crime and the exoneration of Miss Preston.

Some one came to the judge at this moment and handed him a folded paper.

"Was the man who came to you to have his tooth extracted a stranger to you?" the counsel for the prosecution asked.

"No, sir; I knew him well."

"Who was he? What was his name?"

"Hold!" the judge said, rising, and with the paper which had just been handed him open in his hand. "There will be no need to proceed further in the case upon this point, for evidence has just been handed me

which explains everything regarding the supposed crime and wholly removes all suspicion from Miss Preston."

A glad shout rent the air at this information; the hearts of the multitude were too full of joy not to give expression to it in some way, but order was almost immediately restored and the judge read:

"I hereby confess that from motives of revenge I placed the poison in Beatrice Waldron's room *after her death*. A few nights previous, having a severe toothache, I stepped into Doctor Van Dorn's office for relief. He extracted the tooth, and as I took my hat to leave his office I noticed a small parcel labeled poison lying on the table. Actuated by some impulse that I cannot explain I slipped it into my pocket. Immediately after Miss Waldron's sudden and startling death a horrible purpose came to me. Miss Preston had deeply offended me not long before and I had mentally sworn to be revenged upon her in some way. I knew she had been alone with her cousin at the time of her death, and while the doctor and the family were gathered around the bedside I crept into Miss Preston's room, abstracted a tumbler and vial, into which I emptied a portion of the poison before referred to, and which had been in my vest pocket ever since I took it from Doctor Van Dorn's office-table. Watching my opportunity when no one was in the room with the dead, which was very shortly after the physician left, I stole in, sprinkled some of the liquid upon her face and neck, concealed the vial in the ashes under the grate, and set the tumbler containing a few drops upon the table. The sound of footsteps in the hall startled me, and not wishing any one to find me there I hastily stepped into the closet. The nurse entered a moment after, and I was so agitated in my close hiding-place that the perspiration poured over my face. I had no handkerchief, but the light shining through a crevice showed me one sticking out of the pocket of an apron. I took it, wiped my face and replaced it, and it

now occurs to me that I must also have put the paper which had contained the poison with it, as I had kept it in my hand, intending to destroy it as soon as I could safely do so, but in my haste and fear of being discovered I forgot it entirely and afterward could never remember anything about it. The nurse was called out of the room again almost immediately and then I hastened from my hiding-place, and no one ever imagined that I had been there. I write this only to save my mother from the suspicion which during the last hour or two has been brought to bear upon her. I swear that she knew nothing of this, and that she is guiltless of any wrong or foul play regarding Miss Waldron, and I sincerely believe that she thought Miss Preston guilty of the deed of which she accused her. But no crime has been committed; no poison was carried near the girl until more than a half-hour after Doctor Sutherland pronounced her dead. This I most solemnly swear to.

WILLIAM WALDRON."

Then arose cheers that could not be silenced.

Laura Preston was innocent.

This confession to which all had just listened with such breathless interest had solved the whole horrible mystery, and the pure, beautiful girl, who had been so wronged, who had been so patient and gentle through it all—who, even in her evidence given to save her life, had been so lenient and kind to the woman who had so persecuted her, and sought to drive her into a marriage with a man who was capable of this—this lovely girl was saved from a dreadful doom.

Bright, glad, congratulatory glances beamed on her from every side, and Laura, who now that the curse of suspicion was removed from her, seemed to brighten into exquisite loveliness, sat still, modestly yet gratefully appreciating it all.

At this point Mrs. Van Dorn arose and quietly left the court-room.

Meanwhile, the foreman of the jury had handed the judge another paper, after reading which he again enjoined silence.

"The jury," he said, "have intimated that there is no need to proceed further with the case regarding Miss Preston, as they are all convinced and agreed that she is perfectly innocent of any wrong or intent to wrong. Miss Preston might, therefore, consider herself discharged from custody, and free to go where she would."

"But," he added, "the confession which we have just read does not concern the charge against Mr. Harcourt, and the court will now further consider his case."

Mrs. Waldron had sat as one benumbed during the reading of that confession, and when the name at the end was proclaimed and she realized that all the shame and disgrace that she had intended should fall upon and destroy Laura had rebounded upon her idolized son, and thus upon herself, her heart was crushed within her.

"Did you dream of this?" her lawyer whispered excitedly.

She shook her head and then buried her face in her hands. She would gladly have borne it herself rather than that William should be thus ruined before the world.

And William! where was he? When had he written this confession? And what had become of him now?

She started wildly up at this thought and looked eagerly toward the open window where he had been sitting.

She remembered now how deathly pale he had been all day; how, as he had listened to the evidence which step by step unraveled the mystery and seemed to turn suspicion upon her, he had shuddered and clenched his hands in the terrible excitement that he tried so hard to conceal.

But he had disappeared; he had only sat there for a few minutes. As soon as the attention of the audience was riveted again upon the witness in the box he had crept silently out of the court-room, sought a retired

place, where he had hastily penciled his confession, and then finding a messenger dispatched it to the judge.

When an officer went to look for him afterward he was not to be found. He had disappeared, and no one of all that multitude ever saw him again.

A year later a letter came to his mother, telling her of his safety in a far country; and then, after another long interval, news came of his death.

Thus Heaven cared for the innocent, while destruction followed in the track of the guilty.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A SENSATION

As soon as quiet was restored after the reading of the confession contained in the preceding chapter, the court turned its attention to the charge against Eliot Harcourt.

Mrs. Waldron's lawyer, smarting from a sense of defeat in Laura's case, seemed determined upon convicting some one of crime, and thus gain some laurels for himself.

Even if Miss Preston was not guilty, those who had tampered with the dead without permission were answerable to the law, he said.

What had become of Miss Waldron's body after the examination? Where had it been interred? If Doctor Van Dorn had discovered that she had died a natural death, why had he not restored the remains to the casket, and left it to rest in the Waldron tomb, where it belonged?

He claimed that even though the act of Mr. Harcourt and the young physician had resulted in the discovery that no crime had been committed, and in the proof of Miss Preston's innocence, yet there was no excuse for them—they had been guilty of a very grave offense—an offense that was punishable with long imprisonment. They must have realized this, too, and doubtless this was the

reason why they had not come forward before to prove that no crime had been committed, and release Laura from her confinement. He insisted that Doctor Van Dorn and Mr. Harcourt be recalled to answer these puzzling questions. The mystery of the key to the Waldron tomb, that had been missing for so long, should also be explained.

Laura's lawyer replied that he would declare once for all none of the witnesses for the defense knew anything regarding the mystery of the missing key. He believed it must have been lost through the carelessness of the sexton or some member of the family after the burial of Mr. Waldron, as it had been used upon that occasion, and no one had been able to give any account of it since. He said he knew that the offense with which Mr. Harcourt was charged was a very grave one, and the penalty very severe, but as for there being no excuse for it in the case, he trusted he should yet be able to prove that there was, and regarding the severity with which his respected opponent judged his client for not coming forward to make his discovery known, there were good reasons why he could not do so, and he had probably forgotten the fact that Mr. Harcourt had been suffering ever since the arrest of Miss Preston with a dangerous illness, which had rendered him incapable of giving any evidence whatever. Aside from this, there was one especial cause why nothing could have been done in the matter, but before that was explained further, or there was any extended examination of either Doctor Van Dorn or Mr. Harcourt, he would like to call a new witness, who possibly might throw some light on the subject.

"Call Mrs. Van Dorn," he said, turning to the usher as he concluded.

The door in the rear of the witness-box opened a moment or two later, and Mrs. Van Dorn entered, supporting a slight, girlish figure, clad in a beautiful fitting robe of rich, dark silk. She wore a close hat, and a veil of black spotted lace concealed her features.

She walked slowly and feebly as if from weakness, and seemed to cling somewhat nervously to her companion.

Mrs. Van Dorn led her to the witness-stand, where, with a dexterous movement, she removed her hat and veil, thus revealing a pale, beautiful face, framed in a wealth of short, dark, clustering curls.

"Your honor, gentlemen of the jury," said the lawyer, addressing first the judge and then the jury, and speaking with an impressiveness that thrilled every heart, "this is the last witness that I shall call for the defense, and she is one who, I trust, will settle this knotty question once for all. She is—Miss Beatrice Waldron!"

There had been a breathless hush when Mrs. Van Dorn entered, leading the young stranger; it was as if every one had a presentiment of some startling *denouement.*

Laura leaned forward, with heaving bosom and clasped hands, her heart in her eyes, her whole being thrilled with eager, almost agonized expectation.

When Mrs. Van Dorn had removed the hat and veil, and that pale but dear and familiar face met her view, a low, joyful cry escaped her.

"It *is* Trixy; I could not realize it before," she murmured, and fell sobbing and nerveless into Agnes Van Dorn's arms.

Mrs. Waldron shrieked aloud upon recognizing her, and was then borne in a swoon from the room; while the awe-stricken multitude seemed spell-bound, gazing at the frail, beautiful girl, as if they feared she was but some lovely vision that would vanish from their sight with the lightest breath.

Mrs. Van Dorn put her charge into a chair, and remained standing by her side, while Laura's lawyer explained some of the thrilling mystery.

"Your honor, gentlemen of the jury," he said, "you see before you, strange as it may appear, Miss Beatrice Waldron herself, who is still living, and is likely to live for a long time to come. She is, however, still feeble, and

cannot bear the excitement of giving any testimony here to-day. I merely present her to you to prove the statements that I shall make as soon as I have your permission for her to retire. It is sufficient to simply state, in order to vindicate Mr. Harcourt and Doctor Van Dorn, that the latter thought he discovered some signs of life about the young lady, when he was first taken to her room in Mrs. Waldron's house. But the signs were so faint and blind that he did not dare give expression to the hope—he dare not make any disturbance, or create any confusion, such as would have resulted had he confessed to such a belief, lest the result should be unfavorable to Miss Waldron. Moreover, there were indications that poison had been used about her, and he reasoned that if an attempt had really been made upon her life it would be repeated, and he was inspired to take her to a place of safety and try his skill upon her. The result you have before you in the presence of Miss Waldron herself, and I now request that she may be allowed to withdraw, while I enter a little more fully into details, to prove that but for the energy of Doctor Van Dorn, and the fraud that Mr. Harcourt was so successful in carrying out, a precious life would have been sacrificed."

He paused, and the permission that he craved was instantly granted, as every one saw that Miss Waldron was not yet strong enough to bear any excitement, and she retired again supported by Mrs. Van Dorn.

Before she turned away, however, she had glanced over at Laura, smiling brightly, and nodding her curly head in token of glad recognition.

At this cheer after cheer resounded throughout the court-room—there were clapping of hands, stamping of feet, and glad hurrahs. It was the spontaneous outbreak of exultation over the conquest of virtue and innocence over malice and revenge, and they would not be still until they had exhausted their gladness.

Laura was acquitted of every suspicion, and her inno-

cence fully established, and those noble young men, Eliot Harcourt and Doctor Van Dorn, had achieved a triumph over which the most indifferent could but rejoice.

The lawyer in a few, well-chosen words related how it had all been accomplished, and then the jury brought in a verdict of not guilty on the spot; the prisoners were discharged, and joyful congratulations greeted them on every side.

And now to make everything plain to our readers, we must go back to that night when Eliot Harcourt, in accordance with his offer to Mrs. Waldron, was left alone with the body of Trixy Waldron.

The outer cover of the casket had not been put over it; nothing but the single plate of transparent glass lay over the motionless girl, and she looked so peaceful, so natural, that every time he turned his eyes toward her it seemed as if she must awake and speak to him.

He could not keep away from her; time and again he left his chair at the opposite side of the room and went to look at her.

"Can it be possible that there has been foul play?" he asked himself repeatedly, and though he repudiated the idea that Laura could be guilty of the deed of which Mrs. Waldron had accused her, yet he was continually tortured by it.

At last he grew so nervous that he could endure the suspense no longer, and, acting upon a sudden resolution, he carefully removed the glass cover and bent close down to the apparently dead girl.

He took one of her white hands in his.

It was icy cold, but flexible as his own, instead of rigid, as he had expected to find it.

He touched her brow; it was like marble, and he then stooped to see if he could detect the odor of poison about her.

"I am not sure that I can," he muttered to himself,

"but"—with a resolute look—"I will go and bring Tom; he will be able to tell instantly."

Acting upon this decision, he stole noiselessly from the place.

In less than ten minutes he was back, accompanied by Doctor Van Dorn.

He then confided to him everything; the conversation that he had overheard the previous night, showed him the vial and tumbler which Mrs. Waldron had discovered, and noticed that as he smelled it he instantly grew pale as death. He besought him to examine Trixy as thoroughly as he could without disturbing anything, and see if he could discover any trace of the poison about her. He did so, and, as was stated during the trial, thought he did; but that was not what so startled him. It was the appearance of the body, which to his skilled eye did not seem like a dead body; the flesh was not rigid, and the limbs were flexible.

He touched the pulse; he could detect no movement there. He placed his hand under the robe and over the heart; it was also still—no! there was that there that sent a shock through him, and made his breath cease.

It was not really a movement, yet *something thrilled* under his hand.

He gave no sign, for he would not arouse hope in the heart of his friend—he might be deceived himself; but surely—as he pressed more firmly over that heart, there was the slightest ticking sensation, as of a watch, all but run down.

He began to suspect a state of catalepsy, but even then he dare not speak of it.

He suggested a post-mortem examination, and then, as Eliot appeared to think it would not be possible, he intimated that he recognized the poison, and there was no other way by which he could determine whether his suspicions regarding the criminal were true.

When Eliot proposed to remove the body and substitute

the bust, he felt it *must* be done, yet feared the result; for, if there *was* no life in that beautiful body, and the fraud was discovered, he knew the doom that would be theirs.

But when he saw the bust so life-like in every particular, he hesitated no longer, particularly as, while his friend was absent from the room, he thought he discovered another pulsation of the heart, and he worked, in removing the body and substituting the bust, with a rapidity and dexterity that surprised Eliot, and he could but wonder at the intensely anxious expression upon his face during the two hours that it took them to make the change and arrange everything to their satisfaction.

Then they wrapped the young girl in a dark comforter and carried her to Doctor Van Dorn's office, which was but a very short distance from Mrs. Waldron's, by going through a small opening in the fence in the rear of the house.

Leaving her there, Eliot went back to his post, while Doctor Van Dorn began his work.

We cannot follow him through every detail—his anxious watching, his hopes and fears, as that heartbeat, under his skilled treatment, became more distinct, and then died away again to that almost imperceptible ticking, which none but the most cultivated ear could detect. But he never gave up his task, he never relaxed his efforts; he worked unceasingly for hours; he did not sleep, he would not eat, he would not leave her side for an instant, until the feeble pulse assumed a regular vibration, until the heart began to pulsate with some degree of naturalness, and the still breast to rise and fall to the coursing of the vital fluid.

When, after that plaster bust had been borne away to the Waldron tomb, Eliot Harcourt, with pallid face and anxious eyes, came to the door of his friend's office and gave the signal agreed upon, Doctor Van Dorn silently led him into another room, shut and locked the door, and then lifted his own haggard countenance to him.

"What is it?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper. "You have evil tidings for me."

"No, I have good news for you if you can bear to hear it."

"Thank Heaven! then you discover no poison?" Eliot cried gratefully.

"No poison has been administered."

"Then Trixy died a natural death after all," the young artist interrupted, with an expression of intense relief.

"No," Doctor Van Dorn said, very gravely and slowly, "be prepared for some very startling intelligence. Miss Waldron did not die of anything—she is not dead."

"Not dead?" Eliot whispered with white lips, and sinking into a chair and clutching at a table for support.

"No; she was in a state of catalepsy, or rather coma, but I have succeeded in restoring the circulation, though she is still in the most critical condition, and the slightest mistake would result in death even now."

"Great God! What is this that you are telling me?" his companion said in a voice of horror and wiping the perspiration from his face. "What if I had not called you? *What if she had been shut up in that tomb alive!"*

"Hush! Do not speak so loud, and try to calm yourself, for I want your counsel," the young physician said gravely.

"We stand upon very precarious ground," he went on, after a thoughtful pause. "I suppose if it should become known what there is in that casket that was entombed to-day and the fraud traced to us we would be instantly arrested as criminals. I may as well tell you now that I suspected the girl's condition as soon as I saw her last night, or I never would have lent a hand in any such work. I should have gone directly to Mrs. Waldron if I had suspected nothing but the presence of poison and demanded that she allow a post-mortem examination. I dare not tell even you what I thought, for I feared that you would instantly inform your aunt, and if an attempt *had* been made on her life and she was restored in that house

it would be repeated. I found indications of poison about her face, lips and neck. I cleansed these at once, also the inside of the mouth, lest some might have entered, and it would prove fatal when she should begin to swallow. Then I applied such remedies as I had at hand, and after many hours of unceasing work I have succeeded in restoring something of animation."

"I can scarcely credit it! What will you do? How shall we account for this?" Eliot asked in a dazed way.

"We must not do *anything*. We must not account for it in *any way* at present. Miss Waldron's heart is very badly affected; if she should recover it will take a long time; she may, on the other hand, die within a few hours, in which case we must take her quietly to the Waldron tomb, remove that bust from the casket and replace her body in it. It would not do for this thing to become known if such should be the result, since we could not prove that she was living when we took her out, and we should get into deep trouble on account of it."

Eliot Harcourt shuddered.

"We have run a terrible risk," he said. "I do not like to think of it, and I did not realize it so much last night, I was so excited over my suspicions."

"I do not regret it," Doctor Van Dorn answered thoughtfully. "Even if Miss Waldron dies I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that I have done my utmost to save her, even though I may not have taken the most judicious way to accomplish it."

"But what will you do with her? You cannot keep her in your office!"

"She must remain there for a few days; but I can easily arrange that, as I can take another room, and we must find some trusty woman who will give her just the right kind of care. I believe I can arrange it all if you will trust me."

"Certainly I can trust you, but the anxiety is torture. Oh, Tom! if she can only live! *Do* you think there is the

ghost of a chance for her?" and the young doctor could see that the strong man shook like a reed.

"I—hope—so. I will not give up the case without a mighty struggle," he answered resolutely.

"If Laura might know——" Eliot began, wistfully, and heaving a sigh of relief, for he had unlimited confidence in the skill of his friend.

"She must not know," he returned decidedly. "No one must know save ourselves and a competent nurse, for if her friends discovered it they would insist upon coming to her, and the least excitement I warn you will be fatal to her life. Be patient, old boy, and I will do my utmost to bring her out all right, if that old cat will give me time, and let the other one alone; if she goes to stirring up a rumpus, and the authorities insist upon an examination to see if there has been a case of poisoning, there will be the deuce and all to pay."

"If it is only a ruse to make Laura marry William," Eliot said, between his teeth, "if there has been no attempt at crime, I don't believe she will dare to make any public accusation."

"We can only wait and see, but I must go back to my patient, and you must go and get some rest, you look like a ghost yourself."

"I surely feel as if I had seen one," Eliot answered, as staggering to his feet he wrung the hand of his friend and then ran away, while Doctor Van Dorn returned to his interesting charge.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HIS VERY OWN

It was a hard, close, hand-to-hand fight between Doctor Thomas Van Dorn and grim death, but his perseverance,

his untiring devotion was rewarded in a measure at last, and Trixy began slowly to mend.

Even then he did not feel remarkably hopeful regarding her ultimate recovery; she might linger a few months, but the least excitement and imprudence on the part of any one would prove fatal to her. So he would not allow Eliot to come near her, nor to breathe a word of the fact that she was still living, even to sad-hearted Laura, who was also slowly recovering from her illness, lest she should even now die, and all their care be in vain.

After Eliot left him that day when he had revealed to him that Trixy was not dead, he returned to his patient, feeling very anxious, and greatly perplexed to know what to do with her.

He knew he could not, as his friend had said, keep her very long in his office without being discovered by some one, and after gravely considering the matter in every point, he finally resolved to confide everything to his landlady, who was a worthy, kind-hearted widow lady.

She opened her heart at once to the motherless, helpless girl, and immediately made the young doctor's secret her own.

"I will take the dear child under my wing," she said; "I will call her my daughter. I had one once whom I called Bessie. You say her name is Beatrice, so Bessie will do very well for her until you think it will do to let it be known that she is living. Just as soon as you think it will do, I will have her carried up stairs to a large, sunny room adjoining mine, and will take care of her myself."

Doctor Van Dorn was proportionately grateful for this hearty co-operation, this large-hearted charity, and his mind was greatly relieved regarding the weak spirit that was hovering between life and death, and when Eliot was also stricken with that dreadful disease which came so near making an end of him, he could not be too thankful that he had made a confidante of this good woman, who

in case the fraud in the Waldron tomb should be discovered, would be able to testify to the life that he had saved at so great a risk.

From the very first the young physician had experienced a thrilling interest in Trixy. It seemed to him that she belonged to him; he had *willed* that she should live; he had bent all his powers, strained every nerve toward this end; it was almost as if he had infused a portion of his own life into hers, and the feeling which he entertained for her, as day after day he hung anxiously over her, became very tender and absorbing.

For many, many weeks the issue was very doubtful, while she was too weak, too ill, too nearly senseless to realize anything of her condition, or of the care that was being expended upon her.

"I am afraid we cannot save her; I fear my labor has been all in vain," he said, again and again, with moody, anxious brow, as he sat sometimes for hours beside her, his finger upon her pulse, and ministering with his own hand the remedies which he dare not trust to even her faithful nurse, so great was his anxiety that they would not be given exactly as they ought.

"We will do the best we can, and then we must leave the rest with God," Mrs. Lightwell would answer, reverently, and once she comforted him greatly by saying:

"I do not believe that He will let her die, after sending you to save her as He did."

At length Trixy did really begin to gain, and to take notice that those attending her were strangers.

Doctor Van Dorn did not know whether to be most rejoiced or dismayed when she first inquired for her own friends, and why she was in that strange place.

With great tact he evaded her questions for a long time, and then, little by little, he told her enough to satisfy her for the present; and it was not until she was out of danger, and it became necessary to let her know something of Laura's and Eliot's trouble on her account, that they

told her the truth; and even then they kept from her as much as possible the revolting circumstances concerning her supposed death and burial.

It was with great reluctance that Doctor Van Dorn could bring himself to consent to leave her during that week that he spent with his mother in Chicago. But she had written him that there were some business details regarding her property that must be attended to, and she needed his advice, and he felt obliged to obey the summons.

It will be remembered how Laura had noticed the looks of trouble and anxiety that flitted across his face every time his patients were referred to, and solicitude for Trixy alone had caused it.

As the young invalid began to realize something of the care and devotion that he was expending upon her, she also began to depend upon and look up to him with a confidence and fondness that she had never experienced for any one before.

"I never wish to go back to Aunt Roxy," Trixy had said one day, after she had insisted upon knowing what had occurred during the fearful ordeal through which she had passed, and he had also confided to her something regarding Mrs. Waldron's schemes and persecution of Laura.

Doctor Van Dorn stood looking very thoughtfully down upon her for a moment, before replying.

Dare he say what he wanted to?

She was not yet out of danger; might not be for a long time to come, and he had been so careful that nothing should excite her; but his great heart was so full of the love and devotion that had been growing and expanding all these long, trying weeks.

He reached down and took one of the small, thin hands in his, and then said, very gently and calmly:

"You never shall, dear."

"But she is my guardian; I have no other home," Trixy

answered, her eyes wavering a trifle at his manner of addressing her.

"But you have a right to choose your own guardian. You need never go back to that heartless woman, my darling, if you will consent to make a home for yourself and me."

A vivid color, beautiful and clear, leaped into the invalid's cheeks at those suggestive words, while the great eyes that had been watching his countenance were quickly veiled beneath their white, darkly fringed lids.

Doctor Van Dorn's experienced finger was on her pulse. It would not do to excite her, that treacherous heart did not beat right even yet, and whatever he said must be very cautiously said:

"Trixy, dear," he said, calling her by her own name for the first time, and still speaking in low, even tones, though the restraint that he put upon himself was almost more than he could bear, strong man though he was, "if what I have said distresses you do not give it a second thought, nor hesitate to tell me so, and be assured that you will never be reminded of it again; but if you *could* love me as I love you, as I have loved you from that moment when your faint heart-throbs gave me hope that I might win you back to life, I cannot ask any greater happiness while I live. You have hidden your eyes from me, I cannot read what they say, but you do not turn from me, and that gives me hope. I shall be very grateful for your love; but let it be a free-will offering, my dear one."

Trixy's hand trembled in his clasp, and the color kept coming and going in her pale cheeks, but no one save her own heart knew how her very life seemed to depend upon this strong, true man, how every day she watched and longed for his coming, how she regretted his going.

Once Eliot Harcourt had been her ideal. She had gone to him with every grief, she had depended upon him for comfort, and if these strange things of the last few months had not occurred she might have made the fatal

mistake of loving him and of thinking that his presence would always be sufficient for her.

But now she knew that would never be, for her heart had long since owned its allegiance to this strong, tender-hearted, devoted healer of men.

But Trixy, in spite of her long and weary illness, was Trixy still, and the reply which she made to her lover's confession was characteristic of the bright, gay, careless girl of old.

With that beautiful color still in her face and a little smile curving her delicate lips, the hand he still held nestling confidingly in his, she shot one look of mingled fondness and mischief at him from her dark eyes as she said:

"I never believed *any* one would ever *love* Aunt Roxy's fright."

A glad light leaped into Doctor Van Dorn's face, a tender, tremulous quiver of his lips told of great joy surging in his heart, but he gave no eager outward sign, lest he should excite her, his fair, frail love, doubly precious to him now that he felt sure that she would give herself to him.

"Not Aunt Roxy's 'fright' by any means, not Aunt Roxy's anything else, but my own, my very own, from this time forth. Sweetheart, you *do* love me then," he said softly, as he bent down, trying to look into the still averted eyes.

"What else is a body to do when you've had it all your own way with my heart for so long?" she asked half-saucily, and flashing him another look that thrilled him through, and he saw that the little hand which she lifted to toy with his long, silken beard in a child-like, pretty way, trembled with happiness.

With a smile at her imputation he captured this also, and bent fondly over her.

"Kiss me, Trixy," he pleaded gently, and the tender eyes that looked into hers were almost glorified.

Like a child she put up her lips, and he kissed her almost reverently, showing how fondly she was enshrined in his great heart.

"What arbitrary creatures doctors are," she said with a little pout, and trying to hide her confusion from him.

"How can they help it when they have such unyielding subjects to deal with as you have been?" he returned in the same strain.

"I am afraid I shall never be good for much. I should not like to feel that I am to be a burden to you all my life," she said, looking up at him wistfully.

"Let me do all the worrying about that, my darling; it is not good for you to be troubled, and I have great hopes of seeing you a strong and hearty matron yet, if you are obedient; mind, I have made a condition."

"I will do *anything* to be well; everything will be so delightful if I can only get well now," Trixy said eagerly and naively, while the look of confidence which she gave him told how thoroughly and implicitly she trusted him.

"Now, my little snowdrop," the doctor said, smiling, as he brushed back the soft, short curls from her forehead—they had been obliged to cut off all her wealth of hair—"I am going away from you for an hour and intend to test your fealty to your new sovereign by commanding absolute rest for that length of time. I must not weary my treasure at the very beginning."

"A merry heart goes all the day,
Your sad tires in a mile a,"

Trixy quoted with a merry laugh that was like the sweetest music to his ears.

He looked as if he longed to gather her in his strong arms and fold her to his bosom, but he only kissed her lightly again, as he said:

"Honored, exhaustless Shakespeare! he had something apt for every occasion. My darling, wait until you are a

little stronger, and then I'll repay you a thousandfold for the joy you have given your surly old doctor to-day."

"Take care, if you please, and be a little more respectful when you speak of my friends," Trixy retorted threateningly.

"Well, well; I'm afraid I haven't been as gentle as I ought sometimes; I've been so afraid you'd do something imprudent; but good-by——"

"For just one hour," Trixy interrupted, her slender fingers clinging to his strong hand.

"Yes, one hour; do you think, little heart's-ease, that I shall forget?" he asked tenderly.

"Say your table to me; do you know how many minutes make an hour? Sixty—*not* a hundred and twenty," she retorted roguishly.

"That is to reprove me for being so late yesterday," he answered, laughing; "but I will keep my promise better to-day."

"Well, I will try you once more. I would like to see how punctual a doctor can be for once," she returned, with a glance at the little clock on the mantel.

Doctor Van Dorn laughed again softly and, with a lingering, loving, backward glance at the bright, sweet face on the pillow, went away.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DOCTOR'S PERPLEXITY

It was only a few days after the incidents related in the last chapter, that Agnes Van Dorn and Laura arrived in the city, and the latter took up her lonely abode in the gloomy prison.

Doctor Van Dorn did not mention the fact of either his engagement, or of having a patient in the house where he made it his home, to his sister.

He knew that as yet Trixy was unable to have any visitors, and if he should tell his sister about her, and who she really was, she would be in a fever both to see her and to tell Laura the good news.

His precious patient was improving now quite rapidly; her heart-beats were stronger and more regular, a faint though healthful color was beginning to creep into her hitherto colorless cheeks, and the bright, natural expression into her eyes.

Happiness was doing a great deal for her, besides the tender care she was receiving.

Now and then she worried a little over the fear that Mrs. Waldron would oblige her to return to her when she should discover that she was living, but Doctor Van Dorn had said firmly and emphatically that she was never to go back there, and added that if it was going to trouble her so much, he should put a stop to all such nervous thoughts by immediately insisting upon a brief ceremony, which would quickly metamorphose her into a matron possessing a very respectable Dutch name.

This effectually silenced her upon the subject, though it brought a smile of content and a sigh of relief to her lips to know that she should never again be subjected to the tyranny which she had formerly endured from her uncle's wife.

When Mrs. Van Dorn arrived, her son, in the private interview before referred to, confided to her the history of his patient, and confessed to the attachment which had taken possession of his heart for her.

The next day, while Agnes was on a visit to Laura, her mother being too weary after her journey to accompany her, her son took her to see Trixy, and she could not wonder, as she looked at the innocent, beautiful face that was turned to greet her, that he should have grown to love her.

When, out of the abundance of her motherly nature, she gathered the frail girl into her arms and called her

"daughter," Trixy, with something of her old impulse, clasped her arms about her neck and buried her face in her bosom with a gush of happy tears.

She felt at ease with her at once, and unreservedly poured into her sympathizing ears all the trials of the past; how fondly she and Laura had loved each other until Mrs. Waldron, from some inexplicable cause, began to sow dissension between them; how she had tormented her by insisting that she was to marry Fred, and by continually harping upon her faults, her careless and untidy habits, her wild and impulsive ways, instead of kindly pointing them out to her, and helping her to mend them.

"I'm afraid I wasn't as particular as I might have been," she said, with flushing cheeks, but with a sparkle of defiance in her dark eyes, "but it really was droll sometimes to see Aunt Roxy lift up her hands in abject horror and groan over my original sins. They were original, too—some of them—in every sense of the word; for sometimes, as a child, I used to tear my frock purposely, and snarl my hair, when I heard her coming, just to set her never failing vocabulary to running. It was horrible of me, I know, and I used to go away and hate myself for it afterward. Then I'd have a repentant freak, get myself up as fine as a fashion figure, and try to be good, and careful, and tidy. But somehow I never would stay in order; everything would get mixed, and tumble, and awry, and I became discouraged and tired of trying. I think if Aunt Roxy had petted me and made as much of me as she did of Laura, I should have had more heart for it, and she might have got me straightened out to her liking after awhile," Trixy concluded, with a sigh over the remembrance of those trying times.

"Then you think that she did regard your cousin with something of affection?" Mrs. Van Dorn asked, and feeling inwardly amused at the young girl's frank confession of her faults.

"I used to think so then, and it made me jealous and

wicked inside that Laura should have everything—orderly habits, and all the beauty, and all the love; but since lying here and thinking it all over, I begin to feel that she took *that way to manage her.* Laura was proud, and would never give up a point when once she had made up her mind to it, and I rather think that Aunt Roxy considered it best to handle her rather carefully—especially if she intended to make her marry William. I don't believe she—Aunt Roxy—ever loved anything but money; she was always talking of the importance of wealth, position, and society. Uncle William was more kind to me, but Eliot—you should know Mr. Harcourt. Mrs. Van Dorn, I used to think there was no one in the world like him, until——"

"Until what, my lady delight?" demanded Doctor Van Dorn, he having entered the room in time to hear the last sentence. "Has Eliot Harcourt ever made havoc with your heart?"

Trixy shot a saucy glance at him, though she blushed at the question.

"Doctors are *so* inquisitive," she said, "there is no end to their questions. I should think, however, that by this time you might be thoroughly acquainted with the condition of my heart."

"Yes, I think I am, and I am beginning to be quite satisfied with it, too," he returned with a look of fondness and satisfaction at her bright face.

And thus she grew better and happier every hour, while Laura languished in her gloomy cell, and the day of her trial drew near.

Trixy knew that Laura had been fearfully persecuted by Mrs. Waldron after her supposed death, and that she had gone away from her on account of it, and her aunt had heard nothing of her since. They did not dare, just yet, tell her that she was believed to be guilty of the crime of taking her life, and had been arrested for it.

This was one reason why Doctor Van Dorn did not

take his sister to see Trixy before—he feared she might drop something that would lead her to suspect the truth, and he was continually dreading the revelation, though he knew it must be made before very long.

He feared, too, that Agnes could not keep it from Laura, who as yet knew nothing of the fraud of the bust, and Doctor Van Dorn had solemnly pledged his word to Eliot that he would reveal it to no one until circumstances forced him to tell it, or until Trixy was well enough to come forward and prove her own identity.

Of course, Eliot being at this time so ill, he could not absolve him from this promise and he was in deep trouble regarding it, both on account of Laura and his sister.

He did, however, break it so far as to confide in his mother, for he knew she was to be thoroughly trusted and would at once take the sick girl to her heart, while her sweet, motherly ways would do much toward cheering her and helping her on the road to health.

A day or two before the trial they felt obliged to tell her, and the result proved the wisdom of having kept it from her until her strength would bear the shock.

She looked at her lover with a wild, horrified stare in her eyes when, with all the gentleness of which he was capable, he told her.

"Laura arrested for trying to poison me!" she cried, with blanching cheeks and ashen lips. "Who says she did such a thing?"

"Hush, Trixy! you will do yourself injury if you get so excited. Mrs. Waldron is the one who accused her of it," Doctor Van Dorn said, drawing her into his arms and trying to soothe her.

But she pushed him away with a force which he had not thought she possessed.

"Aunt Roxy Waldron is a wicked woman!" she exclaimed; "she *knows* better—it is some more of her wretched plotting to get hold of her money. Let me go

to her at once— I *must* go to her; she shall not believe me dead and suffer in such a dreadful way!"

"Sweetheart, we are going to tell her to-day. We should have done so before, but Eliot wanted to be the one to do it. They will not let him see her, however, and my mother is going to her this afternoon to tell her all about it."

That was their plan, but, as we have already seen, William Waldron was before them, and was the first to tell Laura of the fraud regarding Trixy's body. But when Mrs. Van Dorn told her the rest, it was touching to see the joy and gratitude with which she received it.

"Oh, let me go to her, Tom, to-day," Trixy had pleaded. "Laura loved me—I *know* she did, in spite of Aunt Roxy; she is truth and innocence itself; she would not harm a fly, and all through my sickness she watched and tended me like a sister; let me go—I must—*I will.*"

She started to her feet, sobbing and wringing her hands in a pitiful way. Her face was like chalk, her eyes wild and unnaturally bright, and she panted with every breath.

Doctor Van Dorn followed her and tried to draw her again into his arms, but she threw herself from him and fell exhausted, but in a perfect abandonment of grief upon her bed.

He knit his brows in troubled perplexity, and his own face was deadly white; he feared the worst from this violent outbreak. But he went to her and said sternly:

"Beatrice!"

The tone and the name attracted her attention; she had never heard him speak like this before.

But it was only for a moment; her grief for her cousin was too deep and sincere for her to forget it.

"Laura—oh, Laura!" she moaned.

"Have you no faith in me, Beatrice?" the doctor asked, a trifle more gently than he had spoken before.

"Yes—oh, yes; but it was too cruel to let her stay there all this time and not tell her."

"I know, dear, but it could not be helped, and we all

knew that she would be proved innocent; listen to me, Trixy," and now he gathered her once again in his arms, as if she had been a child, and held her in a close, strong clasp.

She began to grow quieter almost instantly, but he could feel how she trembled, and how her heart fluttered and bounded in its wild, uneven pulsations.

A pang, sharp and terrible, shot through him; would this one outburst undo the work of months?

"Listen, my darling," he repeated. "Laura is well, and in a few days she will be free and will come here to stay with you; if—and it is no light 'if,' my little one, if you are able first to go and testify in her favor. If you should be ill from this excitement; if you should be unable to go to the court-room to prove that Eliot and I saved you, it will not be nearly as well for any of us. This has, without doubt, been a bold plot from beginning to end, and now we want to overwhelm Laura's persecutors with our evidence, and bring them to shame and justice for the evil that they have done; and, Trixy, very much of this depends upon you, or I should never have told you anything of this dreadful story."

"Then I will be calm; I will do *anything* to be able to go and prove that Laura is just the dearest and loveliest girl in the world. I am sorry that I did not think of it at first; but I believe I am very weak even now; and, oh! it is too horrible, Laura in prison for *murder!*" Trixy concluded, shuddering at the thought, while her lover watched her in an agony of suspense, expecting every moment to see that deathly pallor return, and dreading those sinking turns, which he had fought so persistently all through her sickness.

But she was struggling for calmness; her sobs were growing fainter, and her trembling subsiding.

His clasp did not relax; his strong, muscular arms enfolded her close to his heart, as if thus to infuse strength and life into hers. His eyes did not leave her face for a

single instant, and every one of those irregular heart-throbs sent a thrill of pain through his every nerve.

Ah! if she escaped unharmed from this excitement, he might well hope for much for her in the future.

For half an hour or more he sat thus, neither speaking during the time.

At last Trixy looked up into his anxious eyes, and said, humbly:

"I am sorry; I wish I had been more thoughtful and careful; do you think I have done myself any harm?"

"I hope not, dear," he said, with a long-drawn breath, as if some heavy burden was rolling from his heart.

"It was not kind to you after all your care," she added, regretfully. "You are *very* patient, my prince of doctors. I *hope* I shall not give you more trouble by being worse after this."

He bent down and kissed her, a deep feeling of thankfulness in his heart, as he saw that she would come out of it safely.

"You are stronger than I thought, little one," he said; "but you must not repeat this—promise me, Trixy, that you will not give way to such excitement again under any circumstances.

"I will promise to *try* not to. Now tell me all that there is to tell about Laura and Eliot."

"I am afraid," he began doubtfully, "you are tired and weak and ought to rest."

"No, you need not be afraid, and I am resting beautifully now," she said, with a shy glance and a blush. "I will not get excited again, for you have told me that everything will come right, and I know you would not deceive me."

He kissed her again for her faith in him, and then related all that there was to tell, what had been planned for the trial, the evidence which Eliot had secured and which would go far to prove Laura's innocence, even if there was nothing else.

"Of course," he said in conclusion, "we cannot know all the evidence which the prosecuting party will bring to bear against Laura and Eliot, but their lawyer wishes to reserve you as the last witness and bring you forth as a sort of thunderbolt to astound their accusers."

"I'm afraid Jupiter wouldn't consider me a very substantial bolt to be made use of to carry out any plans of vengeance," Trixy said, laughing, and beginning to recover her spirits.

"I think you will find that you are capable of making quite a commotion when the times comes," her lover answered, smiling.

"What will I have to do? Shall I be obliged to give any evidence?" she asked a trifle nervously.

"Not one word," Doctor Van Dorn said firmly. "I have vetoed that; you are not to open your mouth; if you are able just to show yourself, that will be all that I shall allow, and that will be sufficient to prove all that we wish, and secure Laura's and Eliot's immediate release."

"I *shall* be able; I will do anything to be able," Trixy said confidently, "and," she added, while one small arm stole about his neck, and she hid her blushing face from his fond eyes, "I am going to try, if I get well, not to be the careless, impulsive girl that I always have been; I will be more womanly, and try to be the most orderly and considerate wife in the world."

"You will be always just what you are now to me—the dearest treasure that ever a man won, my heart's-ease," Doctor Van Dorn said tenderly, his face beaming with happiness and a strong, glad hope.

He was convinced, after what had transpired during the last hour, that with proper care Trixy would yet be a well woman, with the prospect of living to a good old age to gladden his heart and his home.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A JOYFUL MEETING

So the day of the trial came and went. Laura and Eliot were free once more, their characters vindicated, their names unstained by even the shadow of a suspicion.

The look of sadness, of almost hopeless misery, that had been in our fair heroine's eyes for months was all gone and in its place one of calm content and peace.

When Trixy had come into the court-room and stood revealed to her, with her delicate features refined by sickness, the olive tint, caused by her former careless exposure to the sun, wind and rain, and which had always been such an eye-sore to Mrs. Waldron, all gone, while a faint, blush-rose tint, caused by the excitement of the moment, shone in her cheek, her hair in short, clustering curls, framing the lovely face with its brilliant, star-like eyes—she was to her like some vision from Heaven.

She knew well enough, however, that it was no vision, the poise of that small head, the graceful movements of that lithe form, were all too real and familiar. It was Trixy, changed and more delicately beautiful than she had ever believed that she could be, but her dearly loved Trixy still.

We have seen how the sight overcame her at first, but she could not shut out the blessed vision long, and turned again to feast her eyes upon the dear girl.

When Trixy had smiled and nodded at her, her heart bounded and thrilled with a deeper love than she had ever yet entertained for her, and she felt that henceforth no cloud would come to darken their affection and confidence in each other again.

If there were glad acclamations upon the release of Laura and Eliot, there was also deep indignation expressed

against the authors of all this mischief, Mrs. Waldron and her son.

The latter was denounced in no light terms, and could he have been found doubtless he would have been made to feel the weight of the displeasure of the multitude on the spot, while the scorn and contempt that were expressed regarding Mrs. Waldron's attempts to drive Laura into a marriage with him, were, to say the very least, not complimentary to that lady.

Trixy, upon retiring from the court-room, insisted upon waiting in one of the anterooms to see Laura.

Mrs. Van Dorn, feeling evil effects from the excitement and fatigue that she had already undergone, tried to persuade her to return immediately to their hotel, but Trixy was willful and would not go.

"I will be very quiet and calm," she said, "but I must see Laura," and she sat down and tried to wait patiently until she should be released.

When all was over Eliot went directly to Laura.

But having a knowledge of the love that he cherished for her, a feeling of shyness took possession of her, making her manner somewhat restrained.

He thought her cold and distant, and all the gladness and thankfulness that he would have expressed died upon his lips, and these unacknowledged lovers met with a simple hand-clasp, and then, with a feeling of injustice in their hearts, turned from each other disappointed and pained.

At this moment Laura saw Mrs. Van Dorn coming from a room in the rear of the court-room, and surmising that Trixy might still be there, she broke from the friends gathered round her and darted away to find her.

The fair girl was waiting, listening for her, and arose to greet her as she entered the room where she was sitting.

"Trixy!"

"Laura!"

The full hearts could give utterance to no more, but the close embrace that followed told how closely they were united by the bonds of love, and which nothing in the future would ever serve to weaken again.

To Laura it was like receiving the dead back to life to thus meet one whom, as she believed, she had last looked upon in her coffin.

To Trixy this meeting was the giving of her whole heart to the cousin whom she had always loved to a certain extent, but whom, when Mrs. Waldron had so tantalizingly held up to her for a pattern and set upon a pinnacle so far above her, she had begun to think she should in time learn to hate.

"Oh, my darling," Laura said, when at length she could find her voice, and drawing Trixy more closely to her, "to think that any one would believe I would do you such deadly harm, and all for money!"

"It is too dreadful to think of, but you dear, blessed girl, you don't suppose that *I* believed such a thing for a moment!" Trixy said earnestly.

"That would be the hardest to bear of all," Laura answered, through her tears.

"Well, I haven't had a chance to believe anything very long, for they did not tell me the whole story until the day before yesterday; I have been so ill they did not dare to."

"You *have* been very sick; any one can see that—but, Trixy, you have grown very pretty during these months," Laura said, regarding the girl's delicate beauty with admiring eyes.

"It's very delightful to hear you say so," Trixy said, blushing, "but," she added, "wasn't it dreadful in William to do as he did? and Aunt Roxy! what could she have been thinking of to try to force you into a marriage with him?"

"I think it was the money, Trixy," Laura answered gravely.

"Yes. I believe it was, but what a strange woman she is!"

"Do you remember the night that you were taken ill, Trixy, how I came and crept into bed with you?" Laura asked.

"Yes, and how you sobbed! I wanted to know what troubled you so, but my head ached so fearfully that every sound was a torture to me. I remember you told me that Aunt Roxy had been saying very hard things to you, and I wondered at it, for she always seemed to think *you* were perfect."

"She was determined that I should marry William," Laura explained. "He had offered himself to me after returning from the opera, and, of course, as I did not love him I refused him. He appeared greatly disappointed, but I did not dream that he cherished any feelings of revenge toward me until he came to me a couple of days ago and said he would still save me if I would consent to marry him afterward, but I would not, and so he left me, as I believed, to my fate. But that night after he left me, Aunt Roxy came to me, and talked very unkindly, even threateningly to me. I did not think she would ever put her threats into execution; I thought she was only momentarily angry, and the feeling would soon pass. I suppose, not dreaming that William would ever put that poison in your room, she had to believe it was I who did it, and so was only too glad to make use of it against me, when I still refused to obey her monstrous commands. But," bending a look of fondest affection upon Trixy, Laura continued, "do not let us talk of it any more now, dear, it is such a delight to have you once more, that I cannot endure to think of anything unpleasant, but how very sick you have been; Mrs. Van Dorn told me about it, when she brought me the glad tidings that you were still living."

"I have been, and but for Doctor Van Dorn I should never have seen the light again." Trixy said very gravely and with some embarrassment.

"It is a little strange, is it not, that you and I should both have fallen in the hands of the Van Dorns? The doctor's mother and sister have been very kind to me, and I met him when he was at home for a little visit during the winter," Laura said, while she wondered at Trixy's embarrassment in speaking of Doctor Van Dorn. No one had told her anything of the engagement existing between him and her cousin; that had been left for Trixy herself to tell.

"How do you like him?" she asked with averted eyes, while she played nervously with a tassel attached to her dress.

A look of intelligence and gladness flashed into Laura's eyes—she was quick to read these signs.

"Very, *very* much, Trixy, dear," she said, bending again to kiss her cousin, and with a significance which could not fail to tell her that her secret was discovered.

"But," Laura added a moment after, her face clouding slightly, "I used to think, that is I believed once, that you were fond of Eliot, you used to be such close, confidential friends."

"And so we were, and are still," Trixy said mischievously, her lips curling with amusement; "but not in *that* way. Eliot is going to marry some one else."

"Whom?" Laura demanded, losing her color and wondering if after all Doctor Van Dorn had been deceived regarding his affection for her, and she had thus been cherishing a false hope all this time.

"Well, really," Trixy returned demurely, and all unconscious of the pain she was inflicting, "I don't think he would like anything said about it just yet. But," changing the subject, "I am so glad that you like the doctor; and truly, Laura, I *am* going to try and do the very best I can; *he* shall never have to tell me that I am wild, careless, untidy and a fright. Oh, how I detest that word! it has been rung in my ears until I cannot hear it without a shudder!"

"Poor Trixy!" Laura said, swallowing the choking sensation that had risen to her throat at the ominous words she had uttered regarding Eliot; "you *never* were a fright; you were sometimes careless and a trifle untidy, but you were never a fright to me; your face was always bright, and pretty and piquant, and now, since your illness, you are very lovely."

"Ah, Laura, all my life I have thought how beautiful it would be to know that I was pretty and to have people tell me of it; not because I have any vanity about it, but because it has always been so dreadful to be considered ugly and disagreeable," Trixy said naively and gracefully.

"Your features were always good," Laura answered, "and I'm sure that likeness that Eliot made of you was beautiful enough for anything; but now your complexion seems to have been purified, and there is a refined look about you that you were not accustomed to have. You look happy, too, and these soft, short curls are vastly becoming," and she concluded by lifting her hand, with a caressing touch, to the pretty head resting against her shoulder.

"You *are* very happy, are you not, Trixy?" she asked, a moment after, as she noticed the tremulous smile hovering about her lips.

"Yes, indeed; I cannot tell you how happy," she said, with a shy little laugh. "But hush! here come our friends."

Doctor Van Dorn came bustling into the room, followed by his mother and Agnes.

He went at once to Trixy, and taking her hand, looked searchingly into her face, his fingers on her pulse.

Evidently the result of his observations was satisfactory, for, with a tender smile, he said:

"Little one, you have behaved very well; but you ought to have gone home before this."

Then turning to Laura he congratulated her heartily upon the favorable ending of the trial.

Eliot now approached her again, and said, as if trying

to break down the barrier which seemed so suddenly to have arisen between them:

"Laura, they have used you and me very badly; but I trust we shall be none the worse for it."

"I trust not," she answered, briefly, while those words of Trixy's rankled sorely in her heart.

He looked pained at her coldness, but it instantly froze him again, and feeling weak and weary from the fatigue and excitement he had undergone, he sank into a chair in a corner, where he waited impatiently for the announcement of the carriage that was to take him home.

Mr. Job Temple had made his appearance upon the scene during those brief words that had passed between Laura and Eliot, and his keen eyes and ears had at once remarked the state of the thermometer in that region.

"Cold in here, isn't it?" he said, rubbing his hands briskly together, and addressing Agnes Van Dorn, but with his eyes on Laura's pale, dispirited face.

"Do you think so?" she asked, surprised. "Why, I have been very warm all day. It was absolutely hot in the court-room."

"Was it? Then I think the wind must have shifted since the court adjourned. I should say it was ten degrees below zero in that quarter," he added, *sotto voce,* and with a comical glance from Eliot to Laura.

Miss Van Dorn laughed a low, silvery laugh.

She understood him now, and did not wonder at his judgment of the atmosphere as she saw those pale countenances and averted eyes.

She and Mr. Temple were stanch friends, and had been ever since they made each other's acquaintance when one day they met on their way to visit Laura.

"Come, come," he said, bustling around to get Eliot's cloak and hat, "we've had enough of this dismal place, and I want my dinner. By the way, I've invited myself to dine with Mrs. Van Dorn and her family, so I move we adjourn to more inviting quarters."

"Then I will return at once to my hotel, as I feel quite weary," Eliot said, rising, and adjusting his cloak about his shoulders.

"Indeed, you'll do no such thing. Mrs. Van Dorn is going to look after you, and she will not excuse you. This is to be a family party, and we cannot spare one of our number. Miss Preston, shall I have the honor of driving you? I have a carriage below for that express purpose. Miss Van Dorn will accompany her mother and Eliot, and I do not fear that Miss Waldron will be neglected."

The little old man sent a twinkling glance over at Trixy, whom the doctor was carefully wrapping in a thick shawl, then unceremoniously tucking Laura under his arm, he marched off, followed by the rest of the company.

CHAPTER XXXVII

UNCLE JOB'S OFFER

"WELL, well, Miss Preston!" Mr. Temple said when they were seated in the carriage and he had wrapped her up warmly and their faces were turned in the direction of Doctor Van Dorn's hotel, "we are all right at last; no more prisons, no more charges, no more doubts and suspicions—we've come out at the 'top of the heap,' as they used to say when I was a boy, and we ought to be very thankful and happy; we are, I trust?" he concluded, with an inquiring glance at her.

"Yes, I am very grateful," Laura returned gravely.

How could she say she was happy when her heart was smarting so from that cold meeting with Eliot and while those words of Trixy's were ringing in her ears?

"Um!" Mr. Temple ejaculated, reflectively, and looking up at the sky. "I shouldn't wonder if a long storm set in before a great while unless the wind shifts."

Laura looked at him with surprise at this apparently irrelevant remark.

The sun was shining, the day was fine though a trifle cool, and the wind was directly west; what did he mean by a "storm setting in?"

"Nice fellow that young Van Dorn," he continued after a short pause; "lots of energy and snap to him—think so?"

"Yes; I have a great deal of respect and admiration for him," Miss Preston assented heartily.

"Going to marry your cousin, I believe?"

"Yes; and I am very glad for Trixy; she seems so happy," Laura replied, but the quiet sigh at the close of the sentence did not escape the sharp ears of her companion.

"She is a bright little witch, a merry little girl; but do you think she is hardly sedate enough for a doctor's wife?"

"Why not?" Laura questioned, and wondering what particular need there was for a physician's wife to be sedate.

"Oh, doctors' wives should be calm and unexcitable, ready at any time to take hold and help sew up cuts and wounds. Now, if it was Eliot that she was going to marry there would be some sense in the match; she is just the one to cheer up a dull, monotonous life like his; think so?" and his keen eyes did not lose an expression of the fair face beside him.

"No," she said, with rising color, and remembering Doctor Van Dorn's exceeding tenderness whenever he spoke to Trixy, and the bright, joyous look that flashed over her face at the sound of his voice, "*I* think Trixy is better suited to be Doctor Van Dorn's wife."

"Um, do you? Well, doctors make lots of money, and maybe he'll manage to get a better living for her than Eliot could; a shiftless sort of life these artists lead anyway."

Laura flushed hotly now.

"Indeed," she said with more spirit than he had ever seen her show; "I think you are mistaken; it is a very busy, earnest life, and full of beauty and refinement."

"Humph! what does it amount to if it doesn't bring in the dollars? Artists are all poor devils."

"Not at all, Mr. Temple; I know some artists who have become very wealthy and whose names alone are sufficient to make a picture bring a very high price."

"They must be exceptions to the general lot then, and I don't believe Eliot will ever make his mark in any such way; I've been thinking of advising him to quit the business and go into something sensible. I could let him have a trifle to begin on; the grocery trade is a good one; butchers and marketmen make *lots* of money; and there is the hide and leather business—there's a large profit on them."

Groceries! butchery! hides and leather!

Laura grew heart-sick at the thought.

The idea of the refined, cultivated Eliot Harcourt standing behind a counter and dealing out tea, coffee, spices, etc.; or dressed up in a gown and handling over joints of meat, pork, and hams, with those white hands of his; or, worse yet, of living day in and day out among such disagreeable things as hides and leather, was revolting to her, and her indignation for once got the better of her caution.

"You cannot mean it, Mr. Temple," she cried, turning upon him with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes; "it would be positively wicked to put him into such business with his splendid talents."

Mr. Temple's eyes twinkled at this indignant protest; but he returned, carelessly:

"Well, I don't know, a good, flourishing business would build him up and give him a name and character; artists, as a class, don't amount to much."

"Excuse me, Mr. Temple, but Mr. Harcourt's name and character are, and always have been, since I have

known him, above reproach. I am surprised at your opinion of him! I thought you were his friend," Laura said, indignantly, and with something of hauteur in her manner.

Mr. Job Temple chuckled with inward satisfaction, and then turned to her with an indulgent, good-natured laugh.

"That is a good child," he said, patting her hand in a fatherly way; "you are true blue, and I like your grit. Always stand up for your friends. Eliot is all right, but—*I hope the next time you two meet it won't be in the frigid zone!*"

Laura gave him one quick, startled glance, and the blood rushed in a torrent to her brow, while she bit her lips with vexation; and yet she could not help being amused to see how cunningly he had drawn her out.

If he had not been so kind to her during the last weeks of her imprisonment, and she had not felt that he was a firm, true friend in spite of his eccentricities, she would have been tempted to resent this little bit of strategy on his part. As it was, she deemed it wiser to let it pass, but resolved not to be caught napping again.

She was very quiet and reserved during the remainder of their drive, and when they arrived at the hotel they found the rest of the party before them.

They all dined together in a private parlor, and a sumptuous repast it was, Mrs. Lightwell having personally superintended it, resolving to do her house credit; and then she was made happy by their insisting that she should share it with them.

With two exceptions it was a very happy party that sat down to the elegantly spread table, General Von Osdel also making one of the number, while Doctor Van Dorn, Trixy, and Agnes were the life of the company.

General Von Osdel retired as soon as dinner was over; his eyes had been busy, however, and he saw something of how matters stood between Eliot and Laura, and as he took leave of the latter there was a quiet smile about his

lips, that betrayed he did not think her unhappiness would be of very long duration.

After he left, Doctor Van Dorn insisted that Trixy should go to rest; Mrs. Van Dorn and Agnes claimed Laura, and Eliot and Mr. Temple returned to their hotel, for the former was very weary and stood greatly in need of quiet and rest, and the young physician went out to visit some patients.

"Now, my boy," Mr. Job Temple said the next morning, as he and Eliot sat together after breakfast, smoking their Havanas, "we're well out of that miserable scrape, and I don't believe Roxeny is quite so much of a fighting character to-day as she was yesterday, and I reckon she'll give you and that pretty heiress a wide berth after this; but if you don't mind telling me I'd like to know what you intend to settle down to now?"

"I don't know, Uncle Job. I have hardly given a thought to the future as yet; I have had so much else to think about since I got able to think at all."

"I know, I know; it's been a close pull and a hard pull for you, but I suppose you will want to resume your profession."

"Yes, I love it too well ever to relinquish it until I am convinced that I can make nothing by it, and I have those pictures to finish for the exhibition. How thoughtful it was of you, Uncle Job, to save them for me at the time of the fire! I am very grateful, and I should have been disheartened indeed if they had been destroyed," and the tears actually stood in the young man's eyes as he thought how near he had come to losing the work and hope of many months.

"Well, I couldn't stand tamely by and see them burn when I knew you had put so much of your heart and your life into 'em; I only had time, though, to get out those fine ones you told me were going to the fair and that marble image of the young one and his mother; the rest had to go and all the tools."

"I ought to be very thankful, and indeed I am; but it is really a great loss that I have sustained, for there were many things there that it will take a good deal of time and money to replace; and they *must* be replaced right away, for those pictures are to be finished immediately."

"Well, don't worry about the money, my boy, and as for the rest of them jimcracks, you may find some time that that fire was a 'blessing in disguise,' as the ministers call affliction and disappointment."

"How so?" Eliot demanded in surprise.

"Well," Mr. Temple remarked thoughtfully, and with a peculiar look, "I have an idea that any house which Roxeny Hixon lived in for any length of time might need to be purified by fire. Howsomever, that isn't what I want to talk about just now; of course, you haven't lived all these years without having some idea of what you'd like to do in the future, and I suppose you won't object to telling me about it."

"Oh, no; I've built no end of air-castles, and you are welcome to know how they were constructed; but it is evident they will not amount to anything more substantial for many years, if they ever do, unless I am more successful in the future than I have been in the past," Eliot said, with some bitterness.

"As I have told you before," he continued, after a moment, "I have been especially desirous of raising the mortgage from the old place, and then, if I was prospered, I hoped to be able to repair and improve it, and perhaps make it my home for a portion of every year, where I might quietly follow my profession. I have drawn plans for enlarging and making the house more convenient, and which would not alter the structure much, if any. I would like it to always remain as near as possible to what it was when my mother lived there. But——"

"I suppose, in planning all this, you counted the cost, and calculated upon taking somebody there to live with you; in fact, you would marry if you went there to live,"

Mr. Temple interrupted, regarding him with a shrewd look.

"Of course, no one ever thinks of a home without a woman in it," Eliot answered briefly.

"True—true," and Mr. Temple sighed heavily as he remembered that hope which had animated him during those years that he was bending every energy to win a home for the woman he had loved.

"Well, how much would it cost to do what you want to do to the old place?" he continued, arousing himself from his vain regrets.

"The mortgage is three thousand, and it would take at least five more to renovate the house and bring the grounds into order as I would like to see them."

"Will you let me see your plans?"

"Certainly," Eliot said, rising at once to get them.

"Perhaps," he continued, with a smile, as he put them into Mr. Temple's hand, "you may think me a trifle extravagant in my ideas, but I love the old place, and you know we like to see what we have an affection for in its best light; besides, paper and pencils do not cost much, so I let my fancy have its way."

"Um; quite a taking way, too, I should say," Mr. Temple observed, as he examined the beautiful and elaborate plans spread out upon the table before him.

He studied them carefully for some time, then looking up at his companion, resumed:

"Eliot, my boy, I loved your mother dearly; she was a gem of a woman, and when I found she was dead I felt drawn toward you for her sake, but I've taken quite a 'shine,' as the Irish say, to you for your own sake. I'm a lonely old man, and haven't got such a very long trip to make before I shall reach my landing-place, and when I get through, somebody's got to have my money. If Emeline had been alive I should have gone straight to her, and she'd have had the first handling of it; but she's gone, and so it will come to you. But I'm going to hang on to it as

long as I live; I'm not going to tie my hands by giving it away—only as I like—before I die; I've made it, and now I'm going to have the fun of spending it, as long as I can keep my senses. But, Eliot," laying his hand upon the plans and speaking earnestly, "I'd like to do this for you now, and then beg a little corner of your home and heart to rest in while the sun goes down."

Eliot Harcourt's fine face flushed a deep crimson, and the tears started to his eyes at these last words.

"Thank you, Uncle Job," he said, and there was a tremble in his voice, "you are very kind; you have been very kind to me during the trouble from which I have just escaped, and which I should have been too weak to contend with without the help which you have given me; and I am very grateful to you for it and your hearty sympathy. But much as I love the dear old place that was my mother's home, and desire to own it clear and in good order, I do not feel willing to lay myself under so heavy an obligation to any one. It is a work that I want to do for myself. *I know,*" he continued, kindling into something like enthusiasm, "that I have talents of no mean order; I know that my pictures, my statues, are worthy a high price, and I will yet win a name that will *make* them sell. As for the corner in my home and heart for you, Uncle Job, you have won the latter already, and when I am so happy as to possess the former, no one will be more welcome to share it than yourself."

"You've got your mother's free spirit, and I like your grit, Eliot," Mr. Temple said gravely; "but while you are winning your way you have got to live, and from the way in which you spoke a while ago I judged that you could work to better advantage in the quiet of your own home than here in the city."

"I should enjoy my work there much better, certainly, for I should be surrounded by all the pleasant associations of my childhood."

"Then let me do what I wish as part of the 'fun' of

spending my money, that I spoke of," pleaded the old man.

"But you do not consider, Uncle Job, what it would cost to support such an establishment after it was put in order, and I have no income to meet such expenses, and I could never consent to subsist upon the bounty of another," the young artist returned somewhat proudly.

"If you were sure of an income sufficient to meet your needs would you let me manage the old homestead?" Mr. Temple asked, with a peculiar look.

"I suppose I may safely say yes," Eliot answered, laughing, "since there is no prospect of any fairy coming to shower her golden favors upon me. I am not afraid of work, but there are some reasons why it is a little hard for me to begin at the bottom of the hill and at my time of life," he added, a look of pain in his eyes.

"All I have will be yours some time. My income is more than I can use upon myself, and I would be glad to give you all the desires of your heart, Eliot," Mr. Temple said significantly.

The young man understood him and flushed.

"I appreciate your goodness," he said, "but if your income was three times as much as it is it would make no difference; I should be ashamed, I could not respect myself, and I should not feel that I was entitled to the respect of others, to settle idly down to my own pleasure and spend what another had toiled all his life to accumulate while I have the strength and ability to work for myself. Your money, Uncle Job, while you live, which I hope will be many years, must be your own, and I will yet make my mark in the world."

Mr. Temple smiled.

"I've no doubt that you'll succeed with that spirit," he said, "but perhaps it would be just as well for your own happiness if you hadn't quite so much of the Harcourt pride."

And there, for the time, the matter dropped.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A CHEERING DISCOVERY

Two weeks subsequent to the conversation contained in the last chapter the exhibition of which Eliot had spoken opened.

He entered three paintings and one design in marble, and they were the united work of the last two years.

Two of the paintings had been exhibited the year before, but the artist was young and unknown, and they were judged accordingly, hung in a bad light, consequently their merits had not been recognized.

He had made some changes in them since and painted a new one, putting his whole heart into the work, and had hoped much for them, until the beginning of the troubles in the Waldron mansion, which were followed by his own severe illness, during which he had lost heart as well as strength.

But the sympathy which Mr. Temple had given him had encouraged him greatly, and during those two weeks following the trial he had, turning his rooms at his hotel into a studio, worked with an enthusiasm that almost amounted to inspiration.

Mr. Temple watched him with deep interest, coming in at the close of every day to see what progress he had made, and even Laura could not have complained of his lack of appreciation of an artist's abilities could she but have heard his remarks and suggestions.

Uncle Job was a dear lover of nature, and more than once criticized some point, which Eliot, acting upon, found added not a little to the beauty and truthfulness of his pictures.

He was surprised when he went, accompanied by Mr. Temple, to attend to the hanging of his paintings on the

day previous to the opening of the exhibition, at the attention and consideration which he received.

It happened (?) that spaces were left where the very best possible light would fall upon them, and his heart throbbed with pleasure as he stood off to view them, and found that they exceeded even his fondest desires.

He had put a good round price upon them, thinking that he would not appear to depreciate his own work, although he had small hope of realizing the sums he named.

He had been so busy that he had only seen Laura twice during this time, and then the restraint that was so painful to them both seemed to increase rather than diminish.

He wondered if she would recognize his pictures; she had seen two of them, but he had changed them so much that she might not think they were the same; but he felt sure that her artist eye, for she was a good judge, could not fail to appreciate the merits of his work.

The third day of the exhibition he thought he would run in and take another look round the galleries, and almost the first thing that he saw upon entering was a card tacked below his best picture.

He stepped nearer and read:

"Sold to A. B. Landilands."

His heart throbbed, his face kindled, and he could scarce refrain from giving expression to his exultation, it was so unexpected.

He had once met a Mr. Landilands, who was considered a *connoisseur* of art, and knew him to be a very wealthy gentleman living near Central Park; but the knowledge that he had chosen *his* from among so many others by more noted artists, elated him not a little.

Involuntarily he turned to look at the others, and found that one of these was also sold to a lady whose residence was in Philadelphia.

His courage and spirits rose many degrees, and already

he began to picture to himself a home and home treasures not far in the distance.

The price of those two pictures alone would more than cancel that long-standing mortgage, and he had a right to be hopeful.

If he was only sure that Laura loved him; he used to think that he might win her if he only dare appeal; but now, since this cloud and barrier had come between them, this sudden reserve for which he could not account, he began to doubt that she had ever cared for him.

Thinking of this he wandered absently about until he drew near a group standing before a statue.

It was his own design in marble.

It represented a young mother sitting upon a low chair in graceful abandon, and looking down with an expression of fondest delight, upon the half-dressed babe in her lap. One arm clasped the infant, while her other hand, white, taper, perfect in every detail, held the child's little chubby fist to her breast, as he, with laughing face and tiny feet in the air, seemed to be crowing and cooing, in his captivating way, to the loving face bending so fondly over him.

The work was full of life and feeling, and was strangely fascinating to the beholder. Scarce any one paused to look but seemed spell-bound by the tenderness, pride, and delight in that young mother's face, as well as by the perfect symmetry and unconscious beauty of the little one in her arms.

While Eliot stood there, partially concealed by a large easel on which there was a painting, and listening to the opinions and criticisms of the observers, two ladies drew near, and not noticing him, stood a little apart from the crowd, looking at the statue.

"This statue is Eliot's work, also—he has outdone himself this year," he heard Trixy's voice say, in a repressed tone; and he knew instinctively who her companion was.

"What a lovely thing it is," Laura said, with a deep-drawn breath; "surely he must be appreciated this year—

I never saw more soul and spirit put into pictures or statue before. I wonder if *she* is here to see them."

This last was added absently, and with a far-away look in her lovely blue eyes.

"Whom?" Trixy demanded, turning to her with surprise.

Laura started and colored, plainly betraying that she had not been conscious of having uttered her thoughts aloud.

"The lady whom he is to marry," she said with drooping eyes.

She had brooded over those mischievous words until she had, taking Eliot's coldness and avoidance of her into account, grown to believe them.

"What *do* you mean, Laura?" Trixy asked, with a puzzled face.

"Have you forgotten what you told me on the day of the trial?" Laura asked, and she was very pale now.

"Yes, if it was anything like what you were talking about *just* now," she answered, still reading her cousin's face curiously.

"You told me that Eliot was going to marry some one else, when I said I used to think he was fond of you."

Trixy's bright face dimpled all over in a moment, and her eyes brimmed with merriment.

"You blind, foolish darling! is that the reason you have been so sad ever since? Forgive me if I have, by my thoughtless words, made you suffer any more;" she went on repentantly, "and I wondered why you should treat him so coldly when he called. I believe I'm a born mischief-maker, but I thought, of course, you would clearly understand who that 'some one else' was. Laura, dear, haven't I known for a long time how well you love Eliot, and how his heart is bound up in you? By that 'some one else' I meant none other than yourself. I am sorry my light words misled you—forgive my foolish jesting, dear."

Laura's face was deepest crimson now, but she gave

Trixy a reassuring smile and then moved away to hide her blushes—her heart grown suddenly light and at peace again.

Eliot Harcourt's countenance was radiant with hope as he stole from his hiding-place in an opposite direction, and went away alone to muse over the wonderful good that had come to him that day.

Only one short hour ago he had entered that building in a listless, depressed state of mind; now one little turn of fortune's wheel had bestowed upon him the two things which he coveted above all others—fame, for the sale of his pictures he was assured would soon bring him that, and the priceless love of beautiful Laura Preston.

Laura since the trial had remained at the hotel, where her friends, the Van Dorns, were stopping. She could not bring herself to return to Mrs. Waldron, who, after the fire, had taken another house in a more aristocratic portion of the city, but she had not enjoyed her new surroundings any too well since the revelations at the trial; indeed she had been so nearly sick that she had refused to see any one.

Laura seemed to have a feeling of aversion for her that she could not conquer, and she could not recall that last interview that she had had with her without shudders of horror.

She had decided to return to Chicago with the Van Dorns and Trixy, who was to remain with the family until her marriage, which Doctor Van Dorn had urged should take place early in the fall.

They were to depart now in a few days, and Laura began to feel quite nervous over the event, for since hope had begun to bud once more in her heart regarding Eliot, she had looked hourly for his coming. If he really loved her, why did he not come to her and acknowledge it? She did not dream that his pride stood in the way—that he would allow a mere matter of money to keep them apart.

The afternoon following the one that Laura and Trixy spent at the exhibition, and the cheering discovery that the former had made, the two cousins were sitting alone in Mrs. Van Dorn's parlor, she having gone out with Agnes to do some shopping for the notable event that was to occur in the fall, when Eliot was announced.

Trixy had been in fine spirits all day, and was playing some lively airs on the piano when he entered.

She wheeled suddenly around upon the stool, and running to him, exclaimed laughingly:

"And so the great mogul has at length deigned to call upon us; we have only met you twice since that 'great day,' and then it was by chance. I had begun to think that you had forgotten us, or else intended to give us the cut direct."

"I think, Miss Saucebox, that anyone once having known *you* would find it impossible to forget you with that sharp tongue of yours; but I do not understand why you should dub me the 'great mogul,'" Eliot replied, laughing, as turning from her he stiffly shook hands with Laura. Both were too conscious to appear natural.

Trixy made a grimace as she noticed it and retorted:

"See how his royal highness affects ignorance. Here his name is in everybody's mouth in connection with some perfect gems of art, and he assumes *such* a modest air."

"Well, Trixy," Eliot said with kindling eyes, "I have met with a little bit of success for once in my life."

"A *little bit* of success," she repeated, mockingly. "How appreciative we are; and must the whole world bow at our feet before we are satisfied," and she glanced mischievously at Laura, then added: "I'll warrant that orders have been pouring in upon you ever since your pictures were sold."

"I did receive two orders this morning, which have encouraged me not a little," he admitted, with a furtive glance at Laura, who had scarcely looked up from her embroidery since he greeted her.

"Well, Eliot," Trixy observed, sobering for the moment, "I am just delighted for you, with one exception," and her happy eyes danced again; it was impossible for Trixy to be grave long at a time; "with one exception you are the most capital fellow in the universe, and you deserve to succeed after working so hard. I am as proud of you as if you were my own brother, and"—nestling her hand into his, and speaking with a little quiver of her red lips—"I have cause, and the right to love you very dearly."

"You dear child," he said, moved by her words, and bending down he touched her forehead with his lips, adding, "let me *always* hold a brother's place in your heart."

"Indeed you shall," she said, then throwing up her pretty head roguishly, "*provided* you always behave yourself properly."

Eliot remained half an hour or more, but he and Trixy did most of the talking, for Laura's lips seemed glued together, and she could with difficulty utter the most brief and commonplace remarks.

Trixy watched the distant lovers closely, but she kept up an incessant chatter of fun and pretty nothings to cover their awkwardness.

At length Eliot arose to leave.

"The doctor tells me that you leave New York soon," he said to Trixy, but with his eyes fixed hungrily upon Laura.

"How shall I manage these stupid, obstinate darlings?" Trixy said to herself, with a sigh of impatience.

"Yes, in a day or two, but *I* am coming back again by and by, you know," she answered, with a charming blush.

"I suppose so, and I expect the next time I see you, you will have merged into a most respectable Dutch matron," he replied, smiling.

"No, indeed, sir, you are very much mistaken in your calculations, I assure you; for you are to come to Chicago just one week before the eighteenth of September. I shall

have very important business on hand for you about that time," she retorted, with a very red face, but with an assumption of authority that made him laugh.

"I cannot promise," he said, with another glance at Laura, whose face was now as colorless as a snowflake.

He was going without one fond word to her. What did it mean?

"Yes, you will, or——"

She shook her finger at him, leaving her sentence unfinished.

He now turned to take leave of Laura, and holding out her hand with something like her own former smile, she said:

"I have not congratulated you yet. I think your paintings are very fine, and your statue alone should distinguish you. I am very glad for you."

But the effort that she made to say this only served to make her words sound cold and distant.

"Thank you," Eliot returned, with compressed lips, as he bowed over her hand, and then was about turning away from her, when Trixy laid hers upon his arm to detain him, while she glanced from one proud face to the other, reckless mischief in her dancing eyes.

" 'And one was ice—the other snow.
'Tis *pride,* rank pride, and haughtiness of soul.
I think the Romans call it stoicism,' "

she quoted, laughing, and then rattled on, with a shrug of her slight shoulder:

"You are a couple of dear, foolish things, but you both need to be subjected to a wilting process. There, I hear my Esculapius in the hall. Good-by, Eliot, when you make up your mind to behave like sensible people, I will send you an order for a painting; as you are now, you are in no mood to execute the picture that I want," and

she glanced significantly at Laura, who now stood with crimson cheeks and eyes riveted upon the floor.

And with this parting shot the reckless, saucy little lady danced from the room.

Just outside the door she met Doctor Van Dorn.

She clasped both of her small white hands around his arm and drew him away.

"Don't go in there," she said, with a comical gesture, but a half-frightened look on her bright face, "and, oh! Doctor Tom, I am afraid that I *have* done something dreadful now."

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE CLOUDS DISPERSED

For one brief moment after the door closed upon the daring girl, Eliot Harcourt stood staring blankly at Laura; then bending toward her, he took one hand and drew her nearer to him.

"Laura," he said, and an amused smile played about his lips in spite of the situation, "I'm afraid neither my 'pride' nor my 'stoicism,' as Trixy has termed it, are proof against any such 'wilting process' as she has subjected them to. The little rogue has read my secret, she knows that I love you, and is determined that I shall tell you of it. I did not mean to, Laura—forgive me if I wound you—until I had made my mark in the world, and could bring you a laurel wreath and a fortune that would insure me against the suspicion of being a fortune-hunter. But, my darling, you have been enshrined in my heart for years, and I have hoped sometimes that you were not indifferent to me; only you have been so cold, so distant to me of late, that I feared I had been mistaken. Look up, Laura, and tell me that I may hope."

"You need not have been hopeless quite so long, if you

had behaved sensibly, as Trixy said," Laura returned, in a low voice, and with a shy glance at him from beneath her golden-fringed lids.

He drew her close into his arms now.

"I could not endure to be thought mercenary, dearest; but Trixy has so effectually taken the wind out of my sails to-day that I could do no other way than to succumb," he said, with a radiant face.

"Eliot, do you think that I would for one moment stop to consider either poverty or riches in a question like this? It would make no difference in my love for you—if you have believed it, you the same as charged *me* with being mercenary!" Laura said gravely, and with a grieved quiver of her lip.

"Laura, you know I never attributed any such feeling to you, and had you been a poor girl instead of an heiress I should have told you of my love long ago."

"Then, if it had not been for Trixy's 'wilting process,' your pride would have steeled you against me, even now," Laura said archly, but in a reproachful tone.

"Trixy is a jewel, and I shall never cease to be grateful for that same 'wilting process,' and oh! my darling, it seems too good to be true, that out of all our trouble and suffering there has grown such blessedness as this!" Eliot said fondly, as he drew that beautiful face to his, and kissed, for the first time, those lovely, smiling lips.

The sound of Mr. Job Temple's voice in the hall warned the lovers at this moment that their position might not be quite so entertaining to a third party as it was to themselves; accordingly, when that gentleman entered, followed by General Von Osdel, they were decorously seated upon a sofa, and but for Laura's heightened color and the gladness shining in the young artist's eyes, one might have imagined the latter only to be making a social call.

"Well, well, it's a lovely day, a charming day, and the temperature a leetle more congenial than it was a couple

of weeks ago," Mr. Temple observed, rubbing his hands together in a way he had when satisfied with anything, while his keen eyes twinkled as they roved from Eliot to Laura and back again.

The beautiful girl colored rosy red at this; she had not forgotten what the old gentleman had said about her meeting Eliot in the frigid zone.

General Von Osdel saw at once how matters stood; indeed, he had suspected for some time the state of feeling existing between the young artist and the woman he so deeply loved.

He would not have been human had he not experienced a pang at the knowledge, but he still loved her too fondly to wish anything different that would serve to contribute to her happiness.

"How is Miss Laura?" Mr. Temple continued, a suspicious smile lurking in the corners of his mouth. "I trust your opinion of art and artists continues as favorable as ever."

"Yes, sir!" and she flashed him an arch look of defiance from her glorious eyes as she retorted, "and *I* trust that *you* have relinquished all idea of negotiating with *butchers* and *grocers.*"

"Ha, ha, ha! the old man did ruffle your bright plumage a trifle after all, didn't he? As for butchers and grocers, I think there are indications that considerable negotiating with them will be necessary," he laughed.

Then, turning to Eliot, he continued:

"Well, my boy, I presume you are not too much *engaged* to give a little attention to a bit of good news."

It was Eliot's turn to color now at this allusion to the new relations existing between him and Laura.

"No, sir," he replied; but he wondered what more of good Heaven could bestow upon him than it had already done that day.

"Well, the general there has something to communicate

to you which I hope will give a different color to the spectacles that you have been wearing lately."

At this remark General Von Osdel took an official-looking document from his pocket and passed it to the young man.

"Perhaps that will explain in a measure my errand here, if you will please look it over," he said.

Eliot glanced at the writing on the envelope and then unfolded a paper that was within, a puzzled, wondering expression overspreading his countenance as he did so.

His surprise seemed to increase as he read on, and when he had finished the document he said in a dazed way:

"I do not quite understand—it is very strange."

"You will not think it quite so strange when I tell you that your mother once saved the life of the man whose name you have read there. But before I tell you more about him, let me explain how that document came into my possession. Probably you have not forgotten how exceedingly anxious you were regarding the pictures in your studio the night that Mrs. Waldron's house was burned?"

"No, indeed," Eliot said quickly. "I was too weak to think of attempting to save them myself, and for a time I was nearly wild about the painting that I had designed for the exhibition, and I can never be too grateful to Uncle Job for his energy and care on that occasion."

"You don't owe me any more than you do the general. He's about the coolest cuss in a hot place that it was ever my lot to see—I beg your pardon," he said, with a comical look of dismay at Laura, "I've been rather a stranger to society of late and I'm apt to forget myself—but go on, general, go on."

"Mr. Temple deserves all that you can say," resumed the general smiling, "for he almost went through the flames to get at them, and I, fearing the worst for him, followed on to save him. It was a close piece of work, I assure you, for the fire broke out directly under your room, and nearly the whole lower part of the house was

in flames before he could effect an entrance, and then there was no such thing as returning the same way. We lowered the paintings from a window in Mrs. Waldron's room—or what we took to be hers—and after we had seen your charming statue safely deposited, we began to give some thought to our own safety. A ladder was placed under the window—which was a bay-window—for us to descend by, and I insisted upon Mr. Temple, he being the elder, going first. In getting out of the window he overturned a small table or, more properly speaking, a writing-desk. The lock was broken in the fall, the desk flew open and its contents were scattered on the floor. The room was very light, for the building was almost enveloped in flames just then, and on looking down I saw that document lying at my feet. Almost mechanically I stooped to pick it up, and read the back of the envelope, 'The Last Will and Testament of John Hixon.' John Hixon was a dear old friend of mine, and I had known something about his will long before, as he told me after making it that he had named me as his executor. I was very much disturbed, however, when none could be found after his death. The general opinion was that he had himself destroyed it; but there were several reasons why I could not believe this. I had my suspicions, however, and I am free to say now that they have proved true. It seems a little strange that I should have been called hither just at this time and should have been the one to find the missing will; but 'there is a destiny that shapes our ends,' you know," the brave man said with a smile.

"I experienced no qualms of conscience, however," he resumed after a moment, "about taking possession of the document, and upon rejoining Mr. Temple I informed him of my discovery and asked his advice regarding what should be done with it. I found he was very capable of giving me counsel, as he knew well all parties mentioned in it; and we concluded that as the trial was so near at hand it

would be best to wait until that was over before taking any steps in the matter. That will, as you perceive, makes you equal heir with Mrs. Waldron to John Hixon's property, which amounts to about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Mr. Temple thought, however, that it would be best to say nothing to you about it until we had communicated with Mrs. Waldron, and that we were unable to do until to-day, although we have tried a number of times to do so, as she has denied herself to all visitors ever since the trial. I am obliged to leave the city to-morrow, therefore we insisted upon an interview to-day with the lady, who is really far from well. She appeared greatly distressed upon learning of our discovery, and begged that we take no public action against her for having concealed the will, as she had already suffered more than she could well bear, and she offered to relinquish two-thirds of the fortune if we would keep it quiet. We replied that it would be for you to decide that matter."

The general then went on to explain all that we already know about old John Hixon's will, and that Mrs. Waldron had confessed that after the house was quiet on the night of her uncle's death she had searched for and found the key to his safe, where she found the keys to his desk, from which she had abstracted the will and concealed it about her person, knowing that the property would all fall to her as his only living relative if none was found making any other disposition of it.

Eliot listened to this story like one in a dream. He was amazed at this sudden change in his prospects; he could scarcely comprehend it at first, and looked as grave as if some heavy burden had suddenly fallen upon him.

"Now, my proud-spirited youngster, I reckon we will not be quite so high-headed about having our dear old homestead put in order," Mr. Temple remarked with a chuckle of triumph after General Von Osdel had concluded, "and I for one," he added, "begin to feel quite impatient to see it tenanted once more."

"That you shall see, Uncle Job, just as soon as it can be accomplished; but I can hardly credit this strange story that you have been telling me even yet," Eliot replied. "But what a strange woman Aunt Roxy is," he added thoughtfully.

"Um!" grunted Mr. Temple, "*'strange'* isn't *exactly* the word that *I* should use in connection with Roxeny Hixon. She's been up to mischief all her life, and now she's getting her pay for it; it's a mercy that William Waldron didn't live to see this day; and—and I'm *'tarnal* glad *I* ain't a married man."

Uncle Job was getting excited over the reflection of what would have been his lot if he had married the same "Roxeny Hixon" in the days of old, and he nervously wiped the perspiration that oozed from his brow at the thought. Laura's clear, silver laugh rang through the room at this. His genuine thankfulness was so perfectly ludicrous that she could not help it.

"Laugh away, my 'laurel blossom,'" he said, with a good-natured look at her, "you haven't burned your pretty fingers yet, and I've faith to believe you won't," with a proud glance at Eliot, "but it's a risky business—risky business."

"Well, Mr. Harcourt, what shall be done about this will for you? I suppose it is still my duty to see that my friend's wishes are carried out," General Von Osdel said, turning to Eliot.

"Nothing beyond what is stated in the will," he answered, briefly.

"Will you let that woman go—won't you take any action against her, Eliot?" demanded Mr. Temple, drawing his brows, together in a frown.

"No, sir. She has, as she told you, had much to suffer already, and she will still have enough to bear in the future from her own conscience. I will not lift my hand against her; I will simply let her alone," the young man answered, gravely.

"You'll take up with her offer, I suppose. Two-thirds of that money would make quite a respectable nest-egg."

"Certainly not, Uncle Job," Eliot replied, proudly, "I shall take only what the will gives me," and Laura's lovely face glowed with pleasure at his words.

"I can't say but what I'd have been willing to have had a *son* like you," the old man said, a look of satisfaction stealing over his face, as he laid his hand affectionately upon Eliot's shoulder; then he added, a note of sadness ringing in his tone:

"Roxeny has been her own worst enemy, and we'll let her rest. Perhaps when we get on the other side, and we see each other in a different light, we shall find her soul isn't quite so black as it seems now."

General Von Osdel now arose.

"I shall go West to-morrow," he said, "and I will attend to this matter of the will at once, and communicate with you as soon as possible."

"Thanks," Eliot returned, adding: "and if you can keep the fact of its having been stolen quiet, you will oblige me by doing so."

He promised, and after shaking hands with him and Mr. Temple, he turned to Laura.

"The clouds are all dispersed," he said, with a gentleness that almost drew tears from her eyes as he took her hand in a firm, strong clasp, "a new bright day is dawning for you; may no shadow ever darken it again, and when the evening comes at length may you have that rest that 'He giveth his beloved.'"

With one long, earnest look into her beautiful face, as if he felt that it was for the last time, he turned and went away.

CHAPTER XL

A TRIPLE WEDDING

The 18th of September drew near.

Three weeks before the Van Dorns returned to their home in Chicago from Saratoga, where they had been spending the hot months of the summer, as the doctor thought the spring waters might be beneficial to Trixy. Something evidently had benefited her, for a more charming, merry little sprite than she was now, it would be hard to find, go the world over.

Her cheeks had grown plump and full, and were delightfully pink; her form was rounding into its old graceful curves, while her sunny spirit, her quick wit and mirth were a constant source of delight to those who had grown to love her so dearly.

"Tom will never grow old while *you* live," Agnes would say to her, and the affection that she felt for this new sister that was to be, increased with every day.

Laura also had made one of the party at Saratoga, and happiness had restored the peace and beauty to her face, and the old calm, clear light to her eyes.

During their absence the elegant mansion on Wabash Avenue had been made to assume a most attractive appearance, to do honor to the very unusual event that was approaching and about to transpire beneath its hospitable roof, the event of three weddings in one, and dear, beautiful, motherly Mrs. Van Dorn opened her heart with equal interest to the three charming brides-elect.

"It isn't often that a mother marries off three daughters at once," she said in that hearty way of hers, that almost made the girls feel that she was one with them, "and we'll make the most of the occasion. But," she added, with a suspicious moisture in her kind eyes, and a

fond look at the fair trio, "just think of the empty nest when all my birds are gone."

It had all come about in this way:

Eliot had pleaded that Laura would consent to let Trixy's wedding day be hers also, and Trixy herself, feeling a little timorous in view of the coming event, had at once eagerly seized upon the idea, and Laura could not hold out against the two.

Then Colonel Archibald, upon learning that there was to be a double wedding upon the eighteenth, became clamorous, and declared that unless the dear mater positively forbade it, there should be a third.

It would only be hastening matters a trifle, he urged, as his marriage with Agnes had been previously set for Christmas, and the fuss and flurry would all come together and be done with.

Mrs. Van Dorn, with a laugh and a sigh, said she supposed she might as well make an end of her three birds with one stone, and so the matter was decided.

Le beau monde was in a flutter of excitement and delight over this triple wedding; all the more so on account of the romance that was connected with two of the brides-elect, and more especially because Laura was so well known among them, and of her experience there a few months previous.

Every one was now as eager to do her homage, as they had been to censure and sneer at her during the dark days of her trouble.

But she received it all with the same calmness and equipoise that had characterized her when she had come among them, a stranger and lone, to do battle for her daily bread.

Flattery or prosperity could not make her vain, giddy, or unstable, nor other than the strong, pure-minded girl that she was. Persecution and adversity had not marred the beauty of her spirit, or defaced by a single line of passion or malice the loveliness of her countenance.

Those who had been true and kind to her through it all she clung to and loved with an affection which would outlast her life; those who had mocked and spurned her, she treated with that high-bred courtesy which had always stamped her the true lady. But it was a courtesy which plainly said "thus far and no farther," and the offenders realized that if she should mingle with them for years, no amount of attention or obsequiousness on their part would serve to restore to them the confidence and esteem which they had forfeited.

Uncle Job Temple was full of business just at this time. He, together with Eliot and an efficient corps of workmen, had commenced operations upon the old Harcourt homestead, which was delightfully situated about twenty-five miles up the Hudson, immediately after the departure of the Van Dorns for Chicago.

Notwithstanding Uncle Job's astonishing gratitude over the fact that he "wasn't a married man," he nevertheless manifested a surprising degree of interest in the preparations that were so rapidly hastening that much-to-be-dreaded state for Eliot, whom he had indeed grown to love as a son.

The host of rich and beautiful things that he shipped from New York for the refurnishing and redecorating of the grand old mansion are indescribable, and Eliot wondered at the taste and judgment that he, who was apparently so unversed in such things, displayed; while the delicate and costly trifles by which he turned the rooms that were to be Laura's into perfect bowers of beauty, touched the young artist in a very tender spot.

He spent money as if there was no bottom to his purse; and indeed there did not seem to be any, for he never went anywhere without discovering and bringing home some treasure with him when he returned.

"I am afraid Laura will think you are a very extravagant man, Uncle Job, when she comes to see all these beautiful things," Eliot said one day, after Mr. Temple

had unpacked and set upon its exquisitely carved marble bracket an exceedingly costly and beautiful French clock.

"Nothing is too pretty or too nice for our Laurel Blossom," the old man returned, with a glance of satisfaction round the charming room which was designed as Laura's private sitting-room.

This pretty pet name that he had given her that day in New York had clung to her ever since, and was unanimously adopted by Eliot and the Van Dorns. It just suited her, they all said, and it was singular that Uncle Job should have been the one to give it to her.

But there was, after all, a strange mixture of roughness and refinement about the eccentric old gentleman, while at heart he was as sensitive, tender and sympathetic as a woman, and many of Christ's poor were not slow to discover this, and to bless the hand that ministered so silently and unassumingly to their needs.

Everything was at length in order in that beautiful home on the Hudson; it needed now only the charm of a gentle woman's presence to render it complete, and it was astonishing to see how much had been accomplished in a few short months.

The roomy, substantial mansion had assumed an air of hospitality, comfort and elegance, in place of its former forsaken and neglected condition, and the rich, green lawn that stretched out before it, dotted here and there with ornamental shrubs and pieces of choice statuary, with the cool waters of a fountain playing musically into its marble basin, was not the least attractive feature of the place; while broad fields of rich pasture-land and meadow spread away down to the margin of the river, where a tasteful boat-house had been erected, and rocking upon the waters beneath its shelter there were two boats, one large, stanch and roomy, the other a graceful, fairy-like thing for Laura's use, with "Trixy" painted on its prow in letters of gold.

At one side of the mansion there were spacious, well-

arranged and choicely stocked green-houses, and in the rear the finely appointed stables.

"It's a noble inheritance—a noble inheritance, my boy; thank God that you never parted with it!" Uncle Job said heartily, as he and Eliot stood for a moment looking back upon the fair scene, as they were wending their way to the landing, to take the steamer for New York, whence they were to proceed to Chicago.

"I do—and also for having sent me such a friend in you, Uncle Job, to enjoy it with me," Eliot returned, his fine face all aglow with inward happiness.

"Tut, tut, boy; you may get tired of the old man yet—he's going to grow old and childish, fretful and peevish, by and by; even now I sometimes scatter my quills like an ill-natured porcupine."

"They must all be velvet-tipped then, for they certainly do no harm," Eliot answered, smiling. "But, Uncle Job," he added earnestly, "do not be troubled about the future, for if you were really my father, I could not be more glad to have you in my home, and Laura, when we were talking about the furnishing of the house, wrote, 'Be sure that you reserve the warmest, sunniest, coziest corner for dear Uncle Job.'"

"The Laurel Blossom is a trump, just the daughter that Emeline would have loved," Uncle Job remarked, characteristically, but he turned away his head to wipe a tear from his cheeks.

The eighteenth arrived, and the grand triple wedding took place in the stately church where the Van Dorns were accustomed to worship.

Space and pen fail to do justice to the appearance of the charming brides, each so different from the other, yet all so lovely.

Agnes, with the dignity and stateliness of a queen, was beautiful in white velvet and the ever appropriate orange-

blossoms, with ornaments of diamonds, Colonel Archibald's gift.

Trixy, with her bright, piquant face in its frame of dusky, clustering curls, looked very youthful, but exceedingly pretty and happy in her simple yet rich, corded white silk, with pearls for ornaments, and pure white pansies, these latter forming a graceful wreath to fasten the mist-like veil, and *boutonnieres* to garnish the dress.

But Laura! Every one was obliged to confess that she was the most lovely bride of the three.

Her ivory-white Lyons satin was made perfectly plain, the rich veil alone comprising its garniture, and this being very full and long, was gracefully draped and fastened with sprays of white laurel. This was a little whim of hers, to please Uncle Job, who had bestowed the name upon her, and she had sent an order to Worth, of Paris, to make both her wreath and the sprays for her dress of this flower.

Uncle Job was quick to appreciate this thoughtfulness on her part, for as she stood for a few moments in the drawing-room before going to the church he came to her side, his whole face beaming with tenderness and pleasure, and said softly:

"You do give a thought to the crusty old man occasionally, don't you, Laurel Blossom?"

"Not occasionally, Uncle Job, but very, very often, and you will please substitute a more agreeable word—say 'dear' for the word 'crusty' henceforth," Laura answered, and frankly held up her lips to be kissed, an act which he performed with great evident satisfaction.

"There never had been a more elegant wedding," said critical Mrs. Grundy; "there were never three prettier brides, nor more noble-looking grooms," and the breakfast and reception that followed the ceremony was, without exception, the most *recherche* affair of its kind that had occurred within that notable dame's remembrance.

The afternoon express for the East bore the happy bridal

party back to New York, whence they were to proceed to Eliot's and Laura's home, where they were to spend a couple of weeks before making a more extended tour.

Laura and Trixy, upon talking over various matters previous to their marriage, had decided to send a kind invitation to Mrs. Waldron and Fred to be present at their wedding.

"I cannot bear to mar my joy by one unkind thought or feeling. I want to be at peace with all the world," Laura had said, while a tender pity had filled her heart for the miserable, lonely woman whose life had been such a failure from her own willful misdoing.

But Mrs. Waldron's nerves and health had been too severely shattered to admit of her leaving home, and Fred could not get away from his business.

She wrote them, however, an humble, penitent letter, and sent them a simple yet tasteful gift and begged them, if they could forgive her for the wrong she had done them in the past, to come sometimes to see her.

Her pride had been thoroughly humbled, her hard heart broken, and during the few years that remained to her of life she tried to prove by deeds of charity and kindness to others that, in Uncle Job's words, her soul was not quite as black as it had seemed.

General Von Osdel was not present at the wedding, he having sailed for Europe the last day of August.

Colonel Archibald and Agnes settled in Chicago, near Mrs. Van Dorn. Doctor Van Dorn and Trixy remained in New York, the former rising every year in his profession, the latter a veritable heart's-ease and sunbeam in his home.

Eliot and Laura enjoyed to the full their beautiful home on the Hudson, where every year there was a happy reunion of all the Van Dorns and Archibalds, and where Uncle Job Temple's sun at length went down as quietly and peacefully as the close of a perfect summer's day.

And here we must leave them—our "Heart's-ease" and "Laurel Blossom," surrounded by loved ones and everything to make life delightful; their measure of content filled to the brim and, like true and noble women, contributing of their abundance to brighten the lives of others, while there was nothing now to indicate that their lives had once been so nearly wrecked by the "Shadow of a Crime."

THE END

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In point of publication, "Darnley" is that work by Mr. James which follows "Richelieu," and, if rumor can be credited, it was owing to the advice and insistence of our own Washington Irving that we are indebted primarily for the story, the young author questioning whether he could properly paint the difference in the characters of the two great cardinals. And it is not surprising that James should have hesitated; he had been eminently successful in giving to the world the portrait of Richelieu as a man, and by attempting a similar task with Wolsey as the theme, was much like tempting fortune. Irving insisted that "Darnley" came naturally in sequence, and this opinion being supported by Sir Walter Scott, the author set about the work.

As a historical romance "Darnley" is a book that can be taken up pleasurably again and again, for there is about it that subtle charm which those who are strangers to the works of G. P. R. James have claimed was only to be imparted by Dumas.

If there was nothing more about the work to attract especial attention, the account of the meeting of the kings on the historic "field of the cloth of gold" would entitle the story to the most favorable consideration of every reader.

There is really but little pure romance in this story, for the author has taken care to imagine love passages only between those whom history has credited with having entertained the tender passion one for another, and he succeeds in making such lovers as all the world must love.

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The re-publication of this story will please those lovers of sea yarns who delight in so much of the salty flavor of the ocean as can come through the medium of a printed page, for never has a story of the sea and those "who go down in ships" been written by one more familiar with the scenes depicted.

The one book of this gifted author which is best remembered, and which will be read with pleasure for many years to come, is "Captain Brand," who, as the author states on his title page, was a "pirate of eminence in the West Indies." As a sea story pure and simple, "Captain Brand" has never been excelled, and as a story of piratical life, told without the usual embellishments of blood and thunder, it has no equal.

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THE SPIRIT OF THE BORDER. A Romance of the Early Settlers in the Ohio Valley. By Zane Grey. Cloth. 12mo. with four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

A book rather out of the ordinary is this "Spirit of the Border." The main thread of the story has to do with the work of the Moravian missionaries in the Ohio Valley. Incidentally the reader is given details of the frontier life of those hardy pioneers who broke the wilderness for the planting of this great nation. Chief among these, as a matter of course, is Lewis Wetzel, one of the most peculiar, and at the same time the most admirable of all the brave men who spent their lives battling with the savage foe, that others might dwell in comparative security.

Details of the establishment and destruction of the Moravian "Village of Peace" are given at some length, and with minute description. The efforts to Christianize the Indians are described as they never have been before, and the author has depicted the characters of the leaders of the several Indian tribes with great care, which of itself will be of interest to the student.

By no means least among the charms of the story are the vivid word-pictures of the thrilling adventures, and the intense paintings of the beauties of nature, as seen in the almost unbroken forests.

It is the spirit of the frontier which is described, and one can by it, perhaps, the better understand why men, and women, too, willingly braved every privation and danger that the westward progress of the star of empire might be the more certain and rapid. A love story, simple and tender, runs through the book.

RICHELIEU. A tale of France in the reign of King Louis XIII. By G. P. R. James. Cloth, 12mo. with four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

In 1829 Mr. James published his first romance, "Richelieu," and was recognized at once as one of the masters of the craft.

In this book he laid the story during those later days of the great cardinal's life, when his power was beginning to wane, but while it was yet sufficiently strong to permit now and then of volcanic outbursts which overwhelmed foes and carried friends to the topmost wave of prosperity. One of the most striking portions of the story is that of Cinq Mar's conspiracy; the method of conducting criminal cases, and the political trickery resorted to by royal favorites, affording a better insight into the statecraft of that day than can be had even by an exhaustive study of history. It is a powerful romance of love and diplomacy, and in point of thrilling and absorbing interest has never been excelled.

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Take it all in all, "Horseshoe Robinson" is a work which should be found on every book-shelf, not only because it is a most entertaining story, but because of the wealth of valuable information concerning the colonists which it contains. That it has been brought out once more, well illustrated, is something which will give pleasure to thousands who have long desired an opportunity to read the story again, and to the many who have tried vainly in these latter days to procure a copy that they might read it for the first time.

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Who can read of the beginning of that sweet life, named Mara, which came into this world under the very shadow of the Death angel's wings, without having an intense desire to know how the premature bud blossomed? Again and again one lingers over the descriptions of the character of that baby boy Moses, who came through the tempest, amid the angry billows, pillowed on his dead mother's breast.

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That Helen Sheppard, the heroine, should fall in love with such a brave, skilful scout as Jonathan Zane seems only reasonable after his years of association and defense of the people of the settlement from savages and renegades.

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This story is an authentic exposition of the manners and customs during Lord Baltimore's rule. The greater portion of the action takes place in St. Mary's—the original capital of the State.

The quaint character of Rob, the loss of whose legs was supplied by a wooden bowl strapped to his thighs, his misfortunes and mother wit, far outshine those fair to look upon. Pirates and smugglers did Rob consort with for gain, and it was to him that Blanche Werden owed her life and her happiness, as the author has told us in such an enchanting manner.

As a series of pictures of early colonial life in Maryland, "Rob of the Bowl" has no equal. The story is full of splendid action, with a charming love story, and a plot that never loosens the grip of its interest to its last page.

TICONDEROGA. A Story of Early Frontier Life in the Mohawk Valley. By G. P. R. James. Cloth, 12mo. Four page illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

The setting of the story is decidedly more picturesque than any ever evolved by Cooper. The story is located on the frontier of New York State. The principal characters in the story include an English gentleman, his beautiful daughter, Lord Howe, and certain Indian sachems belonging to the Five Nations, and the story ends with the Battle of Ticonderoga.

The character of Captain Brooks, who voluntarily decides to sacrifice his own life in order to save the son of the Englishman, is not among the least of the attractions of this story, which holds the attention of the reader even to the last page.

Interwoven with the plot is the Indian "blood" law, which demands a life for a life, whether it be that of the murderer or one of his race. A more charming story of mingled love and adventure has never been written than "Ticonderoga."

MARY DERWENT. A tale of the Wyoming Valley in 1778. By Mrs. Ann S. Stephens. Coth, 12mo. Four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

The scene of this fascinating story of early frontier life is laid in the Valley of Wyoming. Aside from Mary Derwent, who is of course the heroine, the story deals with Queen Esther's son, Giengwatah, the Butlers of notorious memory, and the adventures of the Colonists with the Indians.

Though much is made of the Massacre of Wyoming, a great portion of the tale describes the love making between Mary Derwent's sister, Walter Butler, and one of the defenders of Forty Fort.

This historical novel stands out bright and pleasing, because of the mystery and notoriety of several of the actors, the tender love scenes, descriptions of the different localities, and the struggles of the settlers. It holds the attention of the reader even to the last page.

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